



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



TUESDAY — 15 FEB 2022

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Events, Opportunities

HEADLINE	02/15 Russia parliament: recognize separatists
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-parliament-asks-putin-recognise-breakaway-east-ukrainian-regions-2022-02-15/
GIST	<p>MOSCOW, Feb 15 (Reuters) - Russia's lower house of parliament voted on Tuesday to ask President Vladimir Putin to recognise two Russian-backed breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine as independent, the house speaker said.</p> <p>The move by the State Duma, if approved, could further inflame a wider standoff over a Russian military build-up near Ukraine that has fuelled Western fears that Moscow could attack. Russia denies any invasion plans and has accused the West of hysteria.</p> <p>Recognition of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics could kill off the Minsk peace process in east Ukraine, where a conflict between government forces and Moscow-backed separatists has killed 15,000 people.</p> <p>"Kyiv is not observing the Minsk agreements. Our citizens and compatriots who live in Donbass need our help and support," Vyacheslav Volodin, the State Duma speaker, wrote on social media.</p> <p>Volodin, a member of the pro-Putin ruling United Russia party, said the appeal would be sent to the Kremlin immediately. It was not clear how long the Kremlin would take to review it.</p> <p>Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told reporters: "If the decision on recognition is taken, Russia will de facto and de jure withdraw from the Minsk agreements with all the attendant consequences."</p> <p>Moscow casts the conflict in east Ukraine as a civil war, but Ukraine and the West say Russia helps the separatists with its own ground forces, something Moscow denies.</p> <p>Russia has issued more than 700,000 passports to residents of eastern Ukraine since separatists seized territory there in 2014 shortly after Russia annexed Crimea, souring relations with Kyiv and the West.</p> <p>Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov declined to comment on the substance of the appeal, saying that no decision had been taken on it. But he added that the pro-Russian separatist region known as Donbass was a matter of great concern for Russians.</p> <p>He said that Russia had repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to the Minsk peace process and that it still wanted it to be implemented.</p> <p>Four-way east Ukraine peace talks between Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany were held last week but ended without a breakthrough.</p> <p>After the talks, Ukraine said it would not yield to pressure from Moscow to negotiate directly with the separatists, while Russia accused Kyiv of putting forward absurd proposals.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 UN: pollution kills more than Covid
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/pollution-deaths-covid/2022/02/15/id/1056852/
GIST	<p>Pollution by states and companies is contributing to more deaths globally than COVID-19, a U.N. environmental report published on Tuesday said, calling for "immediate and ambitious action" to ban some toxic chemicals.</p> <p>The report said pollution from pesticides, plastics and electronic waste is causing widespread human rights violations as well as at least 9 million premature deaths a year, and that the issue is largely being overlooked.</p>

	<p>The coronavirus pandemic has caused close to 5.9 million deaths, according to data aggregator Worldometer.</p> <p>"Current approaches to managing the risks posed by pollution and toxic substances are clearly failing, resulting in widespread violations of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment," the report's author, U.N. Special Rapporteur David Boyd, concluded.</p> <p>Due to be presented next month to the U.N. Human Rights Council, which has declared a clean environment a human right, the document was posted on the Council's website on Tuesday.</p> <p>It urges a ban on polyfluoroalkyl and perfluoroalkyl, man-made substances used in household products such as non-stick cookware that have been linked to cancer and dubbed "forever chemicals" because they don't break down easily.</p> <p>It also recommends the clean-up of polluted sites and, in extreme cases, the possible relocations of affected communities - many of them poor, marginalized and indigenous - from so-called "sacrifice zones."</p> <p>That term, originally used to describe nuclear test zones, was expanded in the report to include any heavily contaminated site or place rendered uninhabitable by climate change.</p> <p>U.N. rights chief Michelle Bachelet has called environmental threats the biggest global rights challenge, and a growing number of climate and environmental justice cases are invoking human rights with success.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Ethiopia lifts state emergency early
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/africa-kenya-ethiopia-addis-ababa-abiy-ahmed-114c113bf52114157abcb0b165ef3a50
GIST	<p>NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Ethiopian lawmakers have voted to end the country's three-month state of emergency early as mediation efforts continue to end the deadly war in the north.</p> <p>Tuesday's vote by lawmakers came after Ethiopia's Council of Ministers, chaired by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, decided on Jan. 26 to end the state of emergency originally imposed for six months, citing recent developments in the conflict.</p> <p>The state of emergency was imposed in early November as Tigray forces fighting Ethiopian and allied forces moved closer to the capital, Addis Ababa. They withdrew back into the Tigray region in late December amid mediation efforts and under pressure from a drone-supported military offensive carried out by the government.</p> <p>Thousands of mainly ethnic Tigrayans were detained under the state of emergency, according to witnesses, lawyers and human rights groups. Many were released after December's shift in the war.</p> <p>There was no immediate word Tuesday on when the rest of the people detained under the state of emergency would be released. They include a freelance video journalist accredited to The Associated Press, Amir Aman Kiyaro.</p> <p>The state-affiliated Fana Broadcasting reported: "The state of emergency investigation board is instructed to finish any outstanding works within a month and report back to the relevant body. Judicial bodies are also instructed to finish emergency law-related cases within the regular judicial process."</p> <p>Ahead of Tuesday's vote, an advisory committee within the Ethiopian parliament said the lifting of the state of emergency will help revive the country's economic and diplomatic situation. Parliament speaker Tadesse Chafo said the committee believes the country's security threats can now be dealt with by regular law enforcement mechanisms.</p>

	<p>Fana Broadcasting reported that some members of the advisory committee, however, raised concerns regarding threats posed by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front and the Oromo Liberation Army that have been fighting the federal army and its allies.</p> <p>The parliament speaker said security threats in the Amhara, Afar, Benishangul Gumuz and Gambella regions and the Wellega area in the Oromia region will be dealt with by a new “corrective measure” that is being put in place.</p> <p>Ethiopia’s war erupted in November 2020 and is believed to have caused the deaths of tens of thousands of people and the displacement of millions. Though the war has subsided in several places, notably within the Tigray and Amhara regions, concerns remain in the northeastern Afar region.</p> <p>Aid remains badly limited to millions in the Tigray region under what the United Nations has described as a “de facto humanitarian blockade.” On Monday, the World Health Organization said it has been granted access to send medical supplies to Tigray for the first time in six months, but fuel shortages are hampering distribution.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Burglar alarms work after 3G shutdown?
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/technology-business-federal-communications-commission-967e798ec0bb8074f1815b06cf01a0c1
GIST	<p>NEW YORK (AP) — As telecom companies rev up the newest generation of mobile service, called 5G, they’re shutting down old networks — a costly, years-in-the-works process that’s now prompting calls for a delay because many products out there still rely on the old standard, 3G.</p> <p>AT&T is scheduled to be the first carrier to shut down its 3G network on Feb. 22. T-Mobile will shut down its 3G network by summer and Verizon in December.</p> <p>The home-alarm industry has asked the Federal Communications Commission, the U.S. regulator, to delay AT&T’s network sunset until December. The FCC is monitoring the 3G phase-out and working to “implement safeguards” for older phones and other devices, spokesperson Paloma Perez said late Monday.</p> <p>Verizon has already pushed back its shutdown — twice — from an original target date in 2019, saying customers needed more time to update their devices. T-Mobile has also delayed the shutdown of the Sprint 3G network it acquired in 2020, to the end of March; it’ll shut down the T-Mobile 3G network by July 1.</p> <p>WHY IS 3G SHUTTING DOWN?</p> <p>First, some history. AT&T’s 3G network launched in the U.S. in 2004; later that decade it was the exclusive carrier for early iPhones, helping usher in the first phase of the smartphone era. The networks we currently rely on for video streaming, social apps, Uber and other must-haves of the modern era mostly use the subsequent 4G standard.</p> <p>For the carriers, shutting down 3G is an efficiency move. As they upgrade to the latest technology, they shut off outdated networks and use the freed-up bandwidth for newer — and what they hope will be more profitable — services.</p> <p>WHAT IF I HAVE AN OLDER PHONE?</p> <p>People with older phones that aren’t compatible with 4G will have to upgrade; once 3G shuts down, those phones won’t work for calls or texting. AT&T says it has reached out to offer its customers free replacements via letters, emails and texts. Spokesperson Jim Greer said fewer than 1% of AT&T’s consumer devices, including phones, tablets and watches, will lose cellular service, but declined to say</p>

how many devices that is. The company reported about 196 million phones and connected devices using its network in the most recent quarter.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER DEVICES?

Industry groups have also raised concerns about other products that will need to be replaced or updated — everything from home fire alarms to ankle bracelets used by law enforcement. It's not certain how many outdated products are out there, or how big a deal it would be if updates take place after Feb. 22.

The alarm industry and other companies say they have had issues replacing devices even though they've known about the coming shutdown for years. Recent setbacks include both pandemic-triggered supply-chain issues and customers hesitant to let technicians into their homes during the pandemic.

HOW MANY OUTDATED PRODUCTS ARE OUT THERE?

It's not really clear. An alarm-industry lobbying group estimates that 1.5 million customers still need to upgrade their fire or burglar alarms, while about half a million have medical alert devices that run on 3G; it said most rely on AT&T service. While an unnetworked fire alarm will still sound an alarm if there's smoke, it won't be able to contact the fire department. Likewise, burglar alarms won't route to emergency responders if triggered. Not all providers say there's an issue. ADT said in November that it was on track to update its AT&T customers by February; a spokesperson declined to offer an update on Sunday.

AARP, the advocacy group for adults over 50, is also concerned that users of medical alert systems — those necklaces and bracelets, like Life Alert — that connect users to emergency call centers won't know their gadgets don't work anymore or won't be able to replace them in time.

HOW SHOULD I PREPARE?

Check your phone to make sure it will still work. Here's an AT&T list of devices that the carrier says will work normally after Feb. 22. Call the companies that make or service your burglar and fire alarms and personal medical alert systems to see if any need an update. If so, schedule a service visit immediately or get a new device shipped.

OK, DONE. ANYTHING ELSE I SHOULD WORRY ABOUT?

A few. One manufacturer of ankle bracelets for people on probation, parole or pre-trial release said it hasn't been able to update many 3G-reliant devices. A premature shutdown could potentially allow tens of thousands of offenders like child abusers, sex offenders and drunk drivers to go unmonitored while out of prison, Alcohol Monitoring Systems wrote in an August FCC filing. The company did not respond to questions.

Zonar, which provides GPS and other services for buses and trucks, says tens of thousands of vehicles will be affected. Trucks that aren't upgraded may have to be idled if drivers can't electronically log their hours as federal rules require. Zonar has a workaround for the trucking industry, but not all customers have placed orders for it, said Susan Corscadden, a company marketing executive.

Affected school districts could also lose their ability to track the location of school buses, while their drivers may not be able to use GPS systems for directions. The National Association for Pupil Transportation seconded these concerns in a September filing, although Noelle Ellerson Ng, the group's legislative liaison, said in an interview that she hasn't heard school superintendents raise the issue.

SO DOES THE SHUTDOWN POSE A SERIOUS PUBLIC-SAFETY THREAT?

It's unclear. "There's a lot of uncertainty about the impact and about how many people are affected," said Tom Kamber, the executive director of Older Adults Technology Services, a nonprofit affiliated with AARP. The AARP has asked the FCC to delay the AT&T shutdown until December.

	<p>Public Knowledge, a public-interest group, also urged the FCC to block the February shutdown unless AT&T can show that it has made sure that essential services won't be disrupted or that it can restore service immediately if problems arise.</p> <p>SO WHY NOT DELAY?</p> <p>AT&T says that delaying the shutdown would hurt its 5G rollout, degrading its customers' ability to use their service and causing more dropped calls. The company argues that the alarm companies have had years to upgrade their customers' devices. The company also says the FCC doesn't have the authority to stop its shutdown.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Israel PM historic visit to Bahrain
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/israeli-prime-minister-makes-historic-visit-to-bahrain-seeking-to-fortify-gulf-coalition-against-iran/ar-AATS8NX
GIST	<p>MANAMA, Bahrain — With a red carpet and an honor guard of dozens of fully outfitted soldiers who performed Israel's national anthem, Naftali Bennett was welcomed on Tuesday as the first Israeli prime minister to visit Bahrain, a historic move for Israel as it attempts to fortify a regional axis of defense against Iran.</p> <p>Bennett's visit to the tiny, oil-rich country comes as Israel and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf advance security collaboration — and as a shadow war between Israel and Iran, with tit-for-tat attacks on commercial vessels at sea, becomes increasingly public.</p> <p>It also coincides with a final phase of negotiations in Vienna between Iran and world powers to revive a 2015 nuclear deal.</p> <p>"In this turbulent era, it is important that our region in particular sends a message of cooperation and goodwill and standing against threats together," Bennett told reporters before flying to Bahrain on Monday.</p> <p>Israel has clashed with President Biden over his promises to restore U.S. participation in the deal, pledging "compliance for compliance" in order to limit the Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.</p> <p>Since the United States withdrew from that deal, Iran has been rapidly advancing its nuclear program, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog. Israel views Iran's nuclear program as cover for plans to develop atomic weapons; Iran insists it is intended only to generate nuclear energy and denies any intention to build a bomb.</p> <p>On Tuesday, amid a schedule that included meetings with the Bahrain's king, its crown prince, high-ranking state officials and a group of young entrepreneurs, Bennett met representatives of the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, which is based in Bahrain, and called its contribution a "significant element in maintaining regional stability," according to a statement.</p> <p>Abdullah al-Junaid, a Bahraini political analyst, said players in the region have been disappointed to see Americans "go it alone," rather than formulate a cohesive regional approach, in attempts to contain threats from Iran.</p> <p>"We would definitely like to see a new approach to the 'containment' by the U.S. toward Iran, and believe that Vienna shouldn't be the only course," he said.</p> <p>As an alternative to solutions being debated in Washington and Vienna, Persian Gulf nations and Israel have been attempting to formulate a regional response to Iran, experts say.</p>

Since the signing of the Abraham Accords that normalized ties in 2020, announcements of once-clandestine security relations between Israel and the Arab states in the gulf have accelerated, said Yonatan Freeman, an international relations expert at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He added that these included “gateway” countries such as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, which are widely viewed as mediators between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

“There has always been a coalition against Iran, but now these Arab and Muslim countries are also more willing to be seen with Israelis in uniform,” Freeman said. “This increased cooperation with Israel is a result of a green light that countries like Bahrain are getting from their neighbors, such as Saudi Arabia.”

About 860 people have traveled from Saudi Arabia to Israel over the past year, according to data released by Israel’s Ministry of Health coronavirus monitoring website, though it does not specify how many were Saudi citizens.

As Arab world rallies around Palestinians and bloodshed mounts, Trump-era peace deals fade from view Bahrain’s Foreign Ministry said in a statement Saturday that an Israeli officer will be stationed in the country as a representative of a multinational coalition dedicated, in part, to securing freedom of navigation in regional waters, protecting international trade and confronting piracy and terrorism, according to the state news agency.

Earlier this month, Israeli and Bahraini defense ministers signed an agreement “which will contribute to the stability of the region,” said Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz. His visit, made possible by a flight over Saudi airspace, coincided with a U.S.-led naval exercise involving some 60 nations, including Israel and Saudi Arabia. Last fall, navies from Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates conducted their first joint military exercise with Israeli warships, in a five-day drill on the Red Sea that was coordinated by the U.S. Navy.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Highly lethal bird flu: Kentucky, Virginia
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/highly-lethal-bird-flu-found-in-kentucky-and-virginia-flocks-raising-fear-of-wider-outbreak-in-poultry-farms/ar-AATS8yl
GIST	<p>Poultry operations in Kentucky and Virginia were confirmed to have birds infected with a highly lethal form of avian flu, federal agriculture officials said Monday, days after a flock of turkeys in Indiana tested positive, raising worries about a wider outbreak in the country.</p> <p>The most recently identified infections occurred at a Tyson Foods commercial broiler in Fulton County, Ky., that has 240,000 chickens, and in a backyard flock of mixed species in Fauquier County, Va. Kentucky officials said they were also waiting for the results of tests on a flock of turkeys in Webster County.</p> <p>The infections come after 29,000 turkeys were destroyed in Indiana once officials detected the presence of highly pathogenic avian influenza, or HPAI, last week in Dubois County. Federal officials said the Indiana outbreak was the first confirmed case in commercial poultry in the United States since 2020.</p> <p>The developments raise concerns that avian influenza could affect more poultry operations in the United States, which is the world’s top producer of poultry and the No. 2 exporter in volume, according to the U.S. Agriculture Department. They also come as the United States is seeing higher than usual inflation rates in necessities such as food.</p> <p>Avian influenza is carried by wild bird populations that spread the virus to domestic birds. Outbreaks involving more virulent strains result in higher mortality rates in domestic birds, potentially causing disruptions to the food supply. The outbreak in Fulton County was found after the operation reported an increase in poultry deaths to Kentucky officials.</p>

	<p>Avian influenza doesn't pose a public health risk to humans, U.S. agriculture officials said, so long as poultry and eggs are properly cooked at internal temperatures above 165 degrees. No human cases of avian influenza have been detected in the United States, though more than 700 global cases have been reported since 2003, federal officials say.</p> <p>Officials have quarantined the operations in Kentucky and Virginia, the Agriculture Department said, and birds at the locations will not enter the food system.</p> <p>Tyson Foods is heightening biosecurity measures at other farms in the region, Gary Mickelson, a company spokesman, said in an emailed statement. The company tests all flocks for avian influenza before the birds leave the farms, he said. The recent outbreak will not affect Tyson's overall chicken production because thousands of farms raise the birds for the firm, he added.</p> <p>In a deadly outbreak that occurred between December 2014 and June 2015, more than 50 million chickens and turkeys either died of HPAI or were killed to stop the disease's spread, according to the Agriculture Department.</p> <p>The federal government spent almost \$880 million at the time to pay for the destruction of infected poultry, cleaning and indemnities for lost birds. The outbreak also led to a \$1.1 billion decrease in exports of broiler chickens in 2015 compared with the prior year. Egg export income declined by \$41 million, while income for turkeys fell by \$177 million during the same period.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Militants in eastern Congo kill 15
SOURCE	https://news.yahoo.com/machete-wielding-attackers-kill-15-105553194.html
GIST	<p>BENI (Reuters) - Militants armed with guns and machetes killed at least 15 people and injured four on Tuesday in an early morning raid on a village in Congo's eastern Ituri province, according to local authorities.</p> <p>Attackers stormed the village of Syeri Aberkozo just before dawn, hacking residents with machetes and setting several buildings ablaze, sector chief Innocent Matukadala said.</p> <p>"We have a death toll of 15 persons killed, and four people wounded," he said. "Two of the injured are in critical states, and we don't know if God will allow their survival."</p> <p>Matukadala and witnesses blamed the attack on the CODECO militia, which earlier this month killed 60 residents of a displaced persons camp elsewhere in the Ituri province, according to a local humanitarian group and a camp resident.</p> <p>CODECO is one of several militant groups active in eastern Congo, where frictions over land and resources have spurred decades of violence.</p> <p>Its fighters have killed hundreds of civilians and displaced thousands more, and in recent months have attacked camps for those displaced by its own attacks, according to the United Nations.</p> <p>Maki Kilota Gale, a farmer from a village neighbouring Syeri Aberkozo, was shot in the foot while fleeing Tuesday's attack, after having lost several family members in other recent raids, he said.</p> <p>"I wanted to go to my field very early, but halfway there I heard gunshots and immediately started to flee, and that's when I was shot," he told Reuters.</p> <p>"We don't know why these CODECO militiamen are attacking us," he added. "I wanted to die this morning."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Ukraine capital Kyiv calm, determined
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-capital-awaits-a-russian-attack-with-determination-calm-11644856570?mod=hp_lead_pos2
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine—At a bank just off Independence Square in the Ukrainian capital, customers on Monday exchanged their local currency for foreign cash. “Everyone just wants dollars or euros. People are afraid that war is coming,” said teller Anna Ganova. “I’m afraid, too.”</p> <p>The U.S. and Canada have evacuated diplomats from Kyiv, with the White House warning that Russia, which has massed more than 130,000 troops on Ukraine’s borders, could launch a full-scale invasion at any time.</p> <p>Hotels and nightclubs have emptied of tourists and many foreign businesspeople have left, too. And Ukrainians, many of whom initially dismissed the troop buildup as a hollow threat and America’s reaction as overblown, say they are increasingly worried that a bloody conflict is coming.</p> <p>“There has been a turning point in the popular mind-set,” said economist Oleksiy Kushch. “People are starting to sense war.”</p> <p>On the surface, life carries on. Stores are fully stocked. Restaurants and bars are busy. Couples carry Valentine’s Day bouquets. The Kyiv opera theater performed “Romeo and Juliet” on Sunday night. ATMs keep dispensing cash. Nobody is digging trenches, putting up blackout curtains or taping windows.</p> <p>But many businesses report that foreign counterparts are pausing transactions, waiting to see whether this ancient city of three million people will become a war zone. Though the Ukrainian hryvnia’s exchange rate is holding for now, thanks to central-bank intervention, capital outflows are putting the banking system under growing strain.</p> <p>The airline industry is also under pressure. Kyiv on Sunday rushed a \$583 million fund for the industry after one of the country’s main airlines, Sky Up, said it was suspending operations because its insurers refused to cover flights in Ukrainian airspace. Another carrier, Ukraine International Airlines, said Monday it was forced to send five leased Boeing 737-800 planes to Spain because insurers terminated coverage for the country. The remainder of its fleet is still operating.</p> <p>“While the military threat is possible but for now remains theoretical, the military tension has already caused irreversible damage to Ukraine’s economy,” said Halyna Yanchenko, the deputy head of the majority coalition in Ukraine’s parliament.</p> <p>Despite the growing realization that a Russian military invasion is a real possibility, there are few outward signs of panic. That is a change from the chaotic events of 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimea peninsula and began the war in the eastern Donbas region in response to an uprising that ousted a pro-Russian president in Kyiv.</p> <p>“In 2014, there was a fear of the unknown,” said Ms. Yanchenko. “Now, everyone has been tempered by war. People have become stubborn. They are ready to do anything to repel this bloodthirsty aggressor.”</p> <p>President Volodymyr Zelensky on Monday criticized foreign embassies for leaving Kyiv and urged some 20 Ukrainian lawmakers traveling overseas and business tycoons who have been leaving the country to return immediately. “My own family is always with me, always with Ukraine,” Mr. Zelensky said. “A citizen is not someone who carries a passport but someone who chooses to remain in Ukraine, today.”</p> <p>Victoria Voytsitska, a former parliament member who now works in investment and real estate, drove on Monday to western Ukraine with her 6-year-old son and her 20-year-old daughter, to deposit them with her husband’s parents. This was the first day Ms. Voytsitska could leave home quarantine after having contracted Covid-19. Most other cars she saw at the highway gas station were also filled with children.</p>

“There is no reason for our kids to be in Kyiv, especially if there is a full-scale Russian military operation,” she said. After a short rest in her in-laws’ home, Ms. Voytsitska set out for a long drive back to the Ukrainian capital, where she said she planned to join the new territorial defense force. “If, God forbid, the calamity does happen, there will be plenty of things for us to do in Kyiv,” she said. “We will be busy.”

Film director Semen Mozgovy said he already hired a minivan to evacuate his mother and grandmother from his hometown of Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine to the country’s west, should that be necessary. His mother, a school teacher, arranged for a friend to move to their home so it doesn’t get looted. As Mr. Mozgovy is currently stuck working with a TV crew in eastern Ukraine, his main priority now is to arrange for someone to pick up in Kyiv the hard drives containing several years of his work and to ferry them to safety. As soon as Mr. Mozgovy returns to Kyiv, he also plans to join territorial defense forces. “There is no fear, just shock and refusal to believe that all this can be true,” he said.

Ukraine’s interior minister, Denis Monastyrski, who commands the police and National Guard troops, said in a Monday address that the government wouldn’t allow a repeat of the events of 2014, when Russian-backed militants seized or attempted to seize government buildings by force in several cities across eastern and southern Ukraine.

This time, “they will be shot on the spot by our special forces without any warning or hesitation,” Mr. Monastyrski said. “It’s not 2014. Ukraine is stronger and more organized.”

Ukrainian lawmaker Mustafa Dzhemilev, a leader of the Crimean Tatars who had to leave the peninsula after the Russian occupation of 2014 and moved to Kyiv, said he has no intention of going anywhere this time.

“People are thinking more about how to defend the city than how to escape it,” he said. “Ukraine is not what it used to be, and Russia will not have a walk in a park here.”

Anastasia, a 27-year-old information-technology specialist in Kyiv who didn’t want her last name used, said she is also staying put, at least for now: “I don’t want to create panic and I want to continue living our normal lives.”

However, she said she has prepared a go bag in case she has to leave with a first-aid kit, documents, cash and a battery-powered radio to help her keep abreast of the news. She is still looking for a good map for when mobile-phone service goes down and she can no longer use the internet.

She said she would travel to her parents’ home in western Ukraine in case authorities declare a general mobilization. Her boyfriend, a medical doctor, is likely to join the military if war begins.

Some others, however, are already relocating. The Ukrainian Leadership Academy, which runs a program for high-school graduates, has moved its students from Kyiv and the cities of Mykolaiv, Mariupol and Kharkiv to the western Ukrainian cities of Lviv, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk.

“Those places are not under as much risk in case of an escalation,” said the academy’s chief executive, Roman Tyckivskyy. “Even if the enemy decides to also occupy western Ukraine, it will take them time to get there.”

Lviv, the largest city in western Ukraine, which sits just over an hour’s drive from the Polish border, has already become the country’s backup hub. The Canadian Embassy now operates out of a hotel near the city’s medieval Market Square.

The U.S. relocated to Lviv a skeleton staff providing limited consular services. Western Ukraine, which belonged to Poland before World War II, experienced several years of anti-Soviet insurgency after 1945 and would be particularly hard for a Russian occupation force to control.

	Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovyi said his city is bracing for hundreds of thousands of newcomers from the rest of Ukraine should full-scale war erupt in coming days. “My family can accept another family,” he said. “And I think the majority of other Lviv families will take in another family.”
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HEADLINE	02/14 Trucking rates, delays increase; disruptions
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/trucking-rates-delays-increase-amid-canada-disruptions-11644868761?mod=hp_minor_pos13
GIST	<p>Companies involved in Canada-U. S. trade have largely absorbed shipping delays brought on by protests against Covid-19 vaccine mandates by rerouting trucks, freight industry firms said, even as costs to move shipments across the border have increased sharply during the disruptions.</p> <p>Prices to ship goods from Canada to the U.S. on the spot market for standard heavy-duty trucks jumped 44% to \$4.07 a mile from Jan. 2 to Feb. 5, according to Truckstop.com Inc., a platform matching loads to trucks. The rate for refrigerated trucks rose by a third over that period to \$4.87, the company said.</p> <p>Rate increases to ship goods from the U.S. to Canada weren’t as steep, but prices still rose by more than 20% during that period, which includes the time when Canada and then the U.S. imposed a Covid-19 vaccine mandate for cross-border truck drivers but doesn’t include the weeklong period when protests blocked the crucial Ambassador Bridge corridor connecting Detroit to the city of Windsor, Ontario.</p> <p>Trucking companies and Canadian exporters say their costs have been escalating recently with broader capacity constraints limiting the availability of trucks and fuel prices rising. Additionally, fewer truck drivers are available because some have chosen not to get vaccinated, which prevents them from cross-border operations.</p> <p>Traffic on the 1.6-mile bridge was open and slowly returning to normal on Monday after police in Windsor on Sunday arrested protesters and towed vehicles to clear access. Protesters had succeeded in largely blocking most two-way Ambassador Bridge traffic since Feb. 7 in an attempt to persuade the government in Canada to drop Covid-19 vaccine mandates and related social restrictions.</p> <p>The bridge blockade disrupted the continent’s supply-chain network, particularly those of automotive factories that run on just-in-time deliveries from parts suppliers to assembly plants. It will take a few days for the manufacturers that suspended production to be back to full output levels, said Flavio Volpe, president of the Toronto-based Automotive Parts Manufacturers’ Association.</p> <p>Freight-tracking-technology companies said retailers, including supermarkets and consumer-goods merchants, haven’t seen much impact, largely because they have more cushion with inventories than do manufacturers in just-in-time supply chains.</p> <p>“We’ve yet to see an impact on finished goods, consumer products,” said Glenn Koepke, general manager of network collaboration at FourKites Inc., a Chicago-based freight-tracking technology supplier.</p> <p>Project44, another tracking-technology firm based in Chicago, said it measured slim delays across Canada for shipments imported from the U.S. since the beginning of the protests compared with earlier weeks. Delay rates for shipments bound for sites within 100 kilometers (62 miles) of the Windsor border crossing increased the most in that period, rising from 24% of all shipments before the disruptions to 33% after the protests began, according to project44.</p> <p>“Most businesses can accommodate these delays without major disruption due to their wide delivery windows,” project44 said in a blog post on the border delays.</p> <p>Commercial trucks were rerouted to the Blue Water Bridge some 66 miles north of the Detroit-Windsor crossing when the Ambassador Bridge was closed. Truckers faced long delays in crossing that corridor.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Scientists seek variant-proof vaccine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/02/14/universal-covid-vaccine/
GIST	<p>Volunteers are rolling up their sleeves to receive shots of experimental vaccines tailored to beat the omicron variant — just as the winter coronavirus surge begins to relent.</p> <p>By the time scientists know whether those rebooted vaccines are effective and safe, omicron is expected to be in the rearview mirror. Already, mask mandates are easing. People are beginning to talk about normalcy.</p> <p>The disconnect highlights the exhausting scientific chase of the last year — and the one that lies ahead. And it underscores a more pressing, overarching conundrum: Is chasing the latest variant a viable strategy? Instead of testing and potentially deploying a new shot when a new variant pops up, what if a single vaccine could thwart all iterations of this coronavirus and the next ones, too?</p> <p>By now, rebooting vaccines to match a new variant is becoming part of scientific muscle memory. Drug companies made vaccines to fight beta, delta and now omicron. None of those shots have been needed yet, but to many scientists, it is a short-term, shortsighted and unsustainable strategy.</p> <p>“You don’t want to play this whack-a-mole approach,” said David R. Martinez, a viral immunologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “This could go on forever.”</p> <p>The original shot has held up remarkably well, but there’s no guarantee how it will fare against the next variant. Scientists like Martinez want to end the cycle of catch-up.</p> <p>They are inventing vaccines designed to foster broad protection — an immunity wall that will repel not only the variants of SARS-CoV-2 that we know about, but those yet to emerge.</p> <p>At minimum, the world needs a truly variant-proof vaccine. Even better would be a shot that would also stop a future pandemic, protecting against a yet-unknown coronavirus that will jump from animals into people in the years to come.</p> <p>Some experts have questioned why there isn’t already an Operation Warp Speed for these universal vaccines.</p> <p>Anthony S. Fauci, President Biden’s chief medical adviser, stresses the need for patience, along with urgency. There are scientific gaps needing to be filled to build a vaccine that is broadly protective and lasts a long time — and the National Institutes of Health last fall awarded \$36 million to groups trying to answer basic questions.</p> <p>“You shouldn’t confuse the rapidity and the ease with which we developed a coronavirus vaccine for SARS-CoV-2 with the extraordinary obstacles you might face in trying to get a vaccine that protects” more broadly, Fauci said in an interview with The Washington Post. “There’s a lot of scientific discovery that needs to go into that.”</p> <p>Privately, though, scientists say Fauci is urging them to hurry up.</p> <p>“I worry about chasing variants, because there’s always going to be a new variant,” said Drew Weissman, a vaccine pioneer and immunologist at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine who is working on a pan-coronavirus vaccine. “Right now, every six months they pop up, but they’re going to pop up until the world is vaccinated.”</p> <p>‘More tricks’</p> <p>Flush with the success of the first vaccines, many scientists working on next-generation shots had been thinking big in 2021. Maybe they could make a vaccine that would repel not only SARS-CoV-2 and the</p>

original SARS, but also two coronaviruses that cause the [common cold](#), Middle East respiratory syndrome, as well as future bat coronaviruses that could jump into humans.

A [New England Journal of Medicine](#) study last year demonstrated that, at least in concept, it was possible to generate broad immune protection against many viruses. Researchers in Singapore showed that survivors of the original SARS outbreak two decades ago who were vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2 produced antibodies capable of blocking an array of variants and other coronaviruses.

But making a single vaccine that works against such a wide range of viruses is tricky, and the beta, delta and then omicron variants recalibrated some of that sweeping ambition.

“When SARS-CoV-2 first emerged, it was a virus with very few tricks, and so we were very successful,” said Dennis Burton, chair of the department of immunology and microbiology at Scripps Research Institute. “But it’s acquiring more and more tricks, basically, and so it’s more and more difficult to deal with — you’ve got to be more precise with the antibody you induce through your vaccine.”

Before developing a vaccine to stop the next pandemic, it became clear that a more modest goal — a variant-proof vaccine against SARS-CoV-2 — may be needed to help end this crisis.

“Omicron really has pointed us to say, ‘Hey, we’re not out of this epidemic, yet, and we don’t know what the future holds with this epidemic.’ We need to focus on what the next outbreak might be, but also make sure we’re covering any variant ... that would come up in the next three to five years,” said Barton Haynes, an immunologist and vaccine expert at Duke University School of Medicine.

In the short-term, Haynes’s team is focused on stopping variants. They are manufacturing a [vaccine](#) — a nanoparticle with a fragment of the spike dotting its surface. In animal studies, that vaccine triggered broad immune protection against variants, the original SARS virus and bat coronaviruses. Haynes hopes to begin testing it in people this year.

Results are expected soon from the [first human tests](#) of a different “[pan-SARS](#)” vaccine developed by scientists at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. In early studies, they have also shown to provide broader protection than the first-generation shots. It consists of a many-sided nanoparticle dotted with the spike found on the original version of the coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan, China.

Vaccines teach the immune system to recognize a virus. They often do this by presenting a version of the virus — which simply could be a telltale feature, such as the spikes on the outside of the coronavirus. The power of these new vaccines stems from which feature they show and how they present it. Virus fragments are assembled onto many-sided nanoparticles, resembling the way the spike might look on the surface of the virus itself — an approach that helps focus the immune response.

“The immune system has evolved to respond strongly to repetition. Viruses have repetitive arrays of proteins on their surfaces,” said Neil King, a University of Washington biochemist with another variant-proof [vaccine candidate](#) in human trials. “That’s why nanoparticle vaccines work better, is that they present the antigen as a repetitive array, to provoke that strong response.”

‘It’s worth trying’

The first versions of coronavirus vaccines were powerful, but simple. They took spiky proteins from the outside of the virus that emerged in 2019, tweaked them to keep the [spikes in the right shape](#) — and presented those spikes to the immune system.

The next-generation vaccines, the ones built to stop future pandemics, will probably require greater sophistication.

Martinez is working on a vaccine at UNC that shows the immune system “[chimeric](#)” [spikes](#). Like the chimera creature of Greek mythology — with the head of a lion, the midsection of a goat and the rear end of a serpent — these vaccines use spikes patched together from fragments of different coronaviruses. A

piece from SARS-CoV-2, another bit of the original SARS virus and a third component from a bat coronavirus.

Other researchers, like King, are building “mosaic” and cocktail vaccines, which contain other combinations. A tiny particle might be stippled with a key piece of spike proteins from SARS-CoV-2, SARS and two bat coronaviruses, for example. California Institute of Technology researchers created [mosaic nanoparticles](#) with fragments from four to eight different coronaviruses.

The precise approach that will form the best universal vaccine is still a matter of scientific debate. But this much is for sure: Updating vaccines every six months isn’t going to be a reasonable — or equitable — way to protect people globally.

“I don’t think the experience with the variants to date, trying to pursue the new variants as they emerge and rapidly generate variant-specific vaccines — I don’t think that is a strategy for the long term, even in high-income countries, and certainly not in less-well-resourced environments,” said Richard Hatchett, chief executive of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, a nonprofit funding efforts to develop [variant-proof](#) and [universal](#) vaccines.

Discovering that antibodies exist that are capable of recognizing and neutralizing a broad array of viruses is key. But learning how to trigger them to create a shield of protection could be more complicated than it sounds.

It might not be enough that people can generate antibodies to block a variety of coronaviruses. The trick becomes whether a vaccine can generate sufficient quantities to protect people. In HIV, for example, antibodies that block many strains of the always-mutating virus have been isolated in people with long-term infections. But using a vaccine to replicate what nature can accomplish has loomed as the Holy Grail for the field.

In SARS-CoV-2, the spike protein looks a bit like a tree, and rare antibodies that bind to the base of the tree can block a broad array of related coronaviruses [in laboratory studies](#), said Duane R. Wesemann, an immunologist at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston.

“But it’s very low frequency, and if we’re making a vaccine that just does that, we have to see it may not be that easy,” Wesemann said. “It’s not clear we can elicit those special antibodies in high enough levels.”

A universal vaccine will arrive in a more complicated world than the first-generation vaccines encountered. People will have different levels of preexisting immunity, from vaccinations and from infections related to variants.

Scientists do not agree about how previous exposures — known as immune imprinting, or sometimes called “original antigenic sin” — will affect people’s response to new vaccines, for good or bad. One possibility is that new vaccines will create the strongest response to the virus people were originally exposed to, not the newest one. But vaccine designers like Martinez see the potential to exploit this quirk of the immune system as an asset, to focus the response on the right target.

Another scientific issue that remains to be solved is durability. A broad vaccine with protection that fades rapidly might be impractical to use to prevent future pandemics. After all, SARS emerged about two decades ago, and MERS a decade later.

“We’re looking for a tetanus-like shot,” Haynes said. “We all have to get a tetanus shot every 10 years. That would be really terrific.”

The quest for a truly universal vaccine is urgent, but many experts caution that it’s a far different challenge than creating the first-generation vaccines.

	<p>“We have been studying influenza viruses more than 70 years, and we are trying to make universal influenza vaccines, and we still haven’t been able to do it,” said Yoshihiro Kawaoka, who is working on a pan coronavirus vaccine at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. “But this is a different virus, and I think it’s worth trying. What I’m trying to say is that it may not be easy.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 How far China willing to help Russia?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/15/xi-putin-russia-china-beijing-ukraine/
GIST	<p>The display of China-Russia friendship in Beijing was warm enough to melt a Siberian glacier.</p> <p>Ahead of the Opening Ceremonies of the Winter Olympics — an event boycotted by President Biden and nearly two dozen other heads of state — Russian President Vladimir Putin briskly traversed a red carpet to grip the extended arm of Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Gushing ensued during their face-to-face meeting. Putin spoke of an “unprecedented” closeness between the two powers. Their 5,300-word joint statement released the same day amounted to a treatise on the dangers of American preeminence, arguing for a rethink of everything from Washington’s definition of “democracy” to governance of the Internet.</p> <p>The joint statement did not mention Ukraine by name. But with Russian troops poised on that nation’s border, and the United States warning of an attack at any moment, the timing of the lovefest this month wasn’t lost. It came as the West is threatening crippling sanctions on Moscow should its forces act. Putin, as the New York Times pointed out, has been stockpiling currency reserves, slashing its budget and reorienting away from U.S. and European imports to prepare for Western punishment. But even Russia needs friends.</p> <p>China is Putin’s best bet. In the shadow of the escalating Ukraine crisis, the two nations have appeared to forge tighter bonds built on shared strategic interests — and enemies. The joint statement this month suggested a road map for an authoritarian axis that serves as a stronger counterweight to the democratic West, even as they sought to twist the definition of democracy itself.</p> <p>“The Beijing manifesto,” as The Post’s David Ignatius dubs it, sought to present a new vision of a multipolar world bent on the “redistribution of power.”</p> <p>“The two leaders even tried to appropriate the United States’ signature theme of democracy, arguing that it was ‘a universal human value, rather than a privilege of a limited number of States.’ Meaning: Democracy is anything we say it is,” Ignatius writes.</p> <p>U.S. officials have long fretted over the prospect of a strong Sino-Russian partnership, with Henry Kissinger’s historic trip to China in 1971 laying the groundwork for an opening with Beijing and driving a wedge between it and Moscow. Thus, a Xi-Putin bromance is the stuff of U.S. nightmares.</p> <p>But how much of the repackaged partnership is just talk, and how far is China truly willing to go to help Russia?</p> <p>At an Atlantic Council forum last week, former U.S. national security adviser Stephen Hadley argued that China — which recognizes the Ukrainian government and has developed trade ties with it — “will not formally endorse” an invasion, but would nevertheless “blame the United States and blame the West for provoking it and for failing to take into account Russia’s legitimate security interests.”</p> <p>Beijing has denied reports suggesting Xi may have asked Putin not to invade Ukraine during the Olympics so as not to steal Chinese thunder. “The Chinese side advocates resolving differences by means of dialogue and consultations,” the Chinese diplomatic mission in Moscow said in denying the reports, according to Russia’s state news agency Tass.</p>

There's some reason to believe in limits to the Chinese-Russian partnership, especially in the event of serious Western sanctions with knock-on effects for any Chinese companies that violate them. The Chinese show little distaste for authoritarian behavior — doing easy business with nasty regimes. But in general, China dislikes foreign invention, prioritizes economic interests and tends to hedge its bets.

Heavily censored Chinese media as well as government statements have “tended to accept Russia’s framing” of the Ukraine issue, write defense analyst Daniel Shats and security author Peter W. Singer [in Defense One](#). The People’s Liberation Army Daily, among other state media, has run articles that present the United States and NATO as “provocateurs” in a “hybrid war” against Russia, painting Ukraine as their pawn.

“But so far, this rhetoric has not translated into substantive support for Russia’s actions,” they write. “Official statements from the Chinese government have repeatedly emphasized neutrality and a posture of non-intervention, the same stance it took in the 2014 Crimea crisis.”

That stance in 2014 prioritized Chinese access to Western markets.

“China criticized American and European sanctions imposed on Russian officials, banks and companies after 2014,” [the Economist noted last month](#). “But by and large Chinese banks and companies did not try to bust them, putting access to Western markets and financial systems first.”

Still, the current standoff between Russia and the West — as suggested by that opus of a joint statement — may be fundamentally different. Warming Sino-Russian ties have allowed Moscow to redeploy troops from the Chinese border closer to Ukraine in Belarus, according to Bonnie Glaser, the German Marshall Fund’s Asia program director. She [suggests](#) in Foreign Policy that this time, Beijing — locked in its own strategic stare down with Washington over a host of issues including the fate of Taiwan — may be willing to incur costs to break any attempt by the West to isolate Russia, including financially.

“In a wider strategic context where Beijing sees itself in an intensifying rivalry with the United States, consolidating a partnership with Russia is now worth the price of some unhappy European leaders and modest potential economic costs in Ukraine,” [Glaser wrote](#).

Bloomberg News, [citing three senior officials](#), reported last week that the Biden administration increasingly believes China is viewing the U.S. response to Ukraine as a test case for how it might react to Chinese aggression in Taiwan. China’s belligerence there is indeed growing. Last month, Taiwan — which China views as its own territory — scrambled fighters to warn away [39 incursions](#) by the Chinese air force within one day, the largest number since October.

“It will help Xi decide whether and how he should go about military and forceful reunification with Taiwan,” writes Gunjan Singh, [a professor at India’s O.P. Jindal Global University](#).

Chinese academics dispute that characterization — in part because it’s not unusual for them to “grumble when foreigners doubt that China is anything but a peace-loving giant,” [the Economist notes](#). It would surely watch the West’s reaction to Russian aggression in Ukraine closely. But Chinese experts say Beijing understands that a showdown over Taiwan would be far graver.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Minsk peace agreement offer way out?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/14/ukraine-russia-minsk-putin/
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — Amid the global effort to deter Russia from possibly invading Ukraine, France has dusted off a stalled peace agreement that could offer a way out.</p> <p>The Minsk peace agreement, reached in 2015 between Russia and Ukraine, was supposed to end conflict in eastern Ukraine that broke out a year earlier when Russian-backed separatists took up arms. It did not stop the fighting or solve the crisis.</p>

The last talks among the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany on the deal were in 2019.

So why revive it now?

What is the Minsk peace accord?

It is a road map to end fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed militants in two breakaway regions in the east of the country. The deal is named for the Belarusian capital, where the talks leading to the agreement were held.

Under its terms, Ukraine is to give the two regions significant autonomy in return for regaining control of its border with Russia. Ukrainian and Western officials and independent analysts say Russia has armed and supported the pro-Moscow separatists. Russia denies this.

Ukrainians dislike the Minsk agreement so much that Kyiv officials warned recently that implementing it on Russia's terms could trigger riots and chaos. If so, that kind of instability might give Russia an ideal moment to either topple the Western-leaning government or invade.

Russian President Vladimir Putin scoffed at this: "Like it or not, my beauty, you have to put up with it," he said on Feb. 7, a remark directed at Ukraine that was criticized for its crude undertone. (He later denied any intention to insult.)

French President Emmanuel Macron called for resolutely "implementing the Minsk agreements to the end," when he visited Kyiv on Feb. 8. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky publicly agreed.

When was it signed?

The initial deal, signed in September 2014, broke down immediately. The second version was signed in February 2015 after the separatists surrounded desperate Ukraine forces in the eastern city of Debaltseve. Two European leaders at the time — French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel — flew to Minsk to meet Ukrainian then-President Petro Poroshenko and Putin. Their object was to avert a bloodbath.

The talks were "tough and emotional," the Kremlin said. They lasted 16 hours and nearly broke down at various points, reports said. The negotiators came up with a 13-point deal, called Minsk II, including a cease-fire, release of prisoners of war and withdrawal of military equipment from the front line.

Did it work?

From the moment the deal was signed, it was criticized. For one, it failed to stop the bloodshed. Close to 14,000 people have died since fighting broke out in 2014.

The wording of the document is in places open to interpretation, allowing Moscow to push for a settlement on its own terms.

There have been a few successes. Instead of escalating, the war sputtered along. There were some prisoner exchanges.

But the conflict remains an open wound that undermines Ukraine's security. It is an ongoing source of tension that could keep throwing up crises like the current one involving Russia, Ukraine and NATO.

What does Ukraine say?

Many Ukrainians fear the Minsk agreement would enable Moscow to reassert its dominance over Ukraine. It forces Ukraine to give the two separatist regions a special status, including their own militia. Critics in Ukraine see this as a Trojan horse to reverse Ukraine's pro-Western shift and even attempt to install a new pro-Moscow government.

The Capitulation Resistance Movement, one of the main groups opposing the Russian interpretation of the Minsk agreement, has threatened to mobilize mass protests if there are any compromises, such as direct talks with the separatists.

What does Russia say?

Russia claims it was never a party to the war. It insists the first step forward has to come from Kyiv: First, the breakaway regions must be given autonomy, and then elections could be held. And only then would Ukraine regain control over its border with Russia.

Kyiv says the order of events should be exactly the opposite.

Russian officials accuse Ukraine of refusing to meet its obligations and demand that Kyiv negotiate directly with the separatists.

Meanwhile, Moscow has issued more than 600,000 Russian passports in the separatist regions, converting Ukrainians into Russian citizens, complicating peace efforts.

In December, Putin's United Russia party anointed the two separatist leaders as party members. Denis Pushilin, head of the breakaway Donetsk People's Republic, said this was proof that Putin's party saw the regions as "part of greater Russia."

Why do diplomats think the peace deal can work now?

As U.S. officials warn that Russia could attack Ukraine at any time, Kyiv is under pressure to swallow the unpopular peace deal rather than potentially risk losing more territory and lives. European officials say it will take time and hard work.

So far, there is no sign that the deal can be revived. Recent marathon talks in Paris and Berlin did not agree on a way forward.

Ukraine remains unwilling to accept Russia's terms. Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, told the Associated Press that fulfilling the Minsk agreements would mean Ukraine's "destruction."

"What Putin knows (and the West hasn't yet understood) is that any move by Ukraine to formally recognize some kind of 'independence' for Donbass will set off mass protests across Ukraine," Oleksandr Danylyuk, the previous head of the security and defense council, [wrote in a recent essay for Politico](#).

Even if the talks did reach an agreement, there is no guarantee that Zelensky, Ukraine's president, could push an unpopular deal through the parliament.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Covid cases decrease; deaths still elevated
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-02-14/u-s-coronavirus-cases-decrease-but-deaths-remain-elevated
GIST	<p>Coronavirus cases across the U.S. are trending down, but average daily COVID-19 deaths remain elevated as state leaders move to drop mask mandates.</p> <p>As of Monday, new infections were trending down in every state, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.</p> <p>Cases have been decreasing since peaking in mid-January at more than 800,000 infections reported on average each day. The U.S. is now averaging about 175,000 new cases per day, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p>

	<p>The positive trend is one of the reasons many state leaders announced plans last week to nix their mask mandates.</p> <p>“We can responsibly take this step given the continuing drop in new cases and hospitalizations from omicron, and with all the evidence projecting a continued decline over the coming weeks,” New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy said when announcing he will lift the state’s mask mandate for schools and child care settings next month.</p> <p>But U.S. health officials warn the moves are coming too soon as state leaders call on the CDC to offer more guidance on how to move forward with COVID-19.</p> <p>“We are working on that guidance. We are working on following the trends for the moment,” CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said at a press briefing last week. But she noted that “hospitalizations are still high, our death rates are still high. So, as we work towards that and as we are encouraged by the current trends, we are not there yet.”</p> <p>Average daily deaths from COVID-19 remain elevated at over 2,200 each day, and coronavirus transmission is still at a “high” level in every state, according to CDC data.</p> <p>President Joe Biden offered a restrained response to the states’ actions – many of which are coming from Democratic governors – despite the steps going against federal guidance.</p> <p>Biden in an interview said the decisions were “probably premature” but acknowledged that it was a “tough call.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Canadians baffled by the chaos in Canada
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/world/americas/canada-trucker-protests.html
GIST	<p>OTTAWA — It seemed a classically Canadian moment in a scene otherwise torn from the book of Trump America.</p> <p>Between the intersection transformed into a mosh pit and the graceful Parliament buildings cluttered with “fake news,” “the Great Resist” and “Covid red pill” signs, a middle-aged man named Johnny Rowe perched on a median last weekend with an amplifier and a simple greeting.</p> <p>“Welcome to Ottawa,” he called out to the hordes streaming down the middle of the street, many hollering “freedom.” “Thank you for coming.”</p> <p>If the outside world is baffled by the scenes unfolding in the streets of Canada, so are many Canadians. They are dumbfounded, perhaps none more so than the government officials who have stood by largely slack-jawed as giant trucks stake out ground in the normally placid capital, shaking and honking at night as people cheer and dance, neighbors be damned.</p> <p>As demonstrations kept flaring, the government on Monday invoked the Emergencies Act, which greatly increases the government’s power to crack down on protest, and in Alberta the police arrested 11 people and seized a large cache of weapons. Earlier, traffic resumed over the Ambassador Bridge, a major international route blockaded for a week, and officials announced that they were lifting some contentious vaccine pass requirements.</p> <p>The chaos of recent weeks has left many wondering if Canada is witnessing the birth of a political alt-right, or if it is a pandemic-induced tantrum that, once exhausted, will curl itself asleep, leaving behind a country bewildered but essentially unchanged. It could also be, some argue, that the so-called freedom convoy is not an aberration at all but a mirror to an integral part of the country that doesn’t fit the stereotype, and so is ignored.</p>

The unrest seems a rebuff to the cherished mythology imposed on Canada's citizens from abroad and held by many Canadians themselves as moderate, rule-following, levelheaded — and just plain nice.

"It feels like a national nervous breakdown," said Susan Delacourt, a veteran Canadian political columnist from Ottawa who like many of her fellow citizens is wondering what exactly is happening to her country right now.

Start with the pervasive slogan of the unrest, scrawled across trucks, hats, shirt and flags, an epithet startlingly vulgar by Canadian standards that urges Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to go away. Some say he should be not just deposed but imprisoned over the vaccine regulations governments in Canada have passed.

The anger is new. Over the past two years of public health crisis, Canadians have followed their classic playbook. Even right-leaning provincial governments dutifully took their lead, for the most part, from public health experts, passing strict pandemic rules that citizens then followed.

While there have been some mask protests, more outrage was directed at local governments for not doing *more* to protect their citizens, and at [politicians who broke the rules](#). Wearing a mask, and getting the vaccine, was deemed a basic act of civic solidarity. Canada has one of the [highest rates in the world](#), with more than 83 percent of the population over the age of 5 having received at least two vaccine doses.

"Let's take care of each other in this time of need, Canada," Mr. Trudeau [tweeted](#) in March 2020, days after his wife showed symptoms and he became [the first G7 leader to self-isolate](#). "Because that's really who we are."

Maybe it is because Canada, unlike the neighbor that overshadows it, was born not from revolution but from negotiation that its approach to rebellion now seems more than a little unconventional, even quirky. But one thing is clear: The members of the so-called freedom convoy are not bellowing "compromise" or "care for one another."

The streets of downtown Ottawa echo with chants and slogans steeped in the language of the American Revolution, right down to the Don't Tread on Me pennants. "Freedom," yells a man in a red mask waving a Canadian flag. "Freedom," comes the ardent reply. Though the flag, it should be noted, was held aloft in a quintessentially Canadian fashion, attached to a hockey stick.

The repeated invocation of liberty is just one reason — along with the American, Confederate and Trump flags spotted in the mix — many believe the unrest is essentially a U.S. import.

For two years, Canadians have been largely stuck at home, and many have spent more time in front of the screen than ever. As they did, they absorbed the American culture war being played out from Fox News to Breitbart, and Trumpian ideas took root in Canada, said Gerald Butts, a longtime friend of Mr. Trudeau's and his former top political aide.

It was not just ideas.

Right-wing activists in the United States and elsewhere have lent more than moral support to their new kindred spirits in Canada. They are opening their wallets. At least some of the money that has allowed the protesters to keep their trucks fueled and cover other expenses has flowed in from untraceable sources on crowdfunding platforms and cryptocurrencies.

Canadian political veterans have taken note.

"We ran the longest federal election campaign in history in 2015, and we spent \$42 million, right?" said Mr. Butts.

By comparison, in just a few weeks, the truckers raised about a quarter of that.

“One of the most concerning things about this movement,” Mr. Butts said, “is it’s shown how easy it is to pour millions of dollars of dark money into Canadian politics.”

The question now is how might that play out in the months and years ahead.

Traditionally, Canadian politics is a [fight for the center](#), not for the fringes of the ideological spectrum. Political analysts point out that the far-right People’s Party of Canada, whose leader, [Maxime Bernier](#), is a champion of the trucker protest, did not win a single seat in last year’s parliamentary election.

But, populism isn’t totally alien to the country, points out Janice Stein, a political science professor at the University of Toronto. A populist, the brother of the Ontario Premier Doug Ford, was once mayor of the country’s biggest city, Toronto, and for years, the Reform party rallied around a sense of Western alienation and socially conservative values.

“There’s a worrying tendency in Canada to define everything pushing against our founding myth as an import from the United States,” Ms. Stein said. “We have mythologized our niceness: ‘We are not polarized like France and Britain, and the only major democratic country in which the center has held is Canada, and that’s because we’re so nice and so caring to each other.’”

Canadian politics may in fact be more genteel than in many other places, but not because Canadians are innately kinder. That has just become a lot clearer.

“This is a myth-busting moment,” Ms. Stein said.

Sooner or later, the trucks will depart, but will the movement the prime minister dismissed as a “small fringe minority” continue to grow? Some have their doubts.

“This is a one-off political expression,” said Paul Summerville, co-author of the book “[Reclaiming Populism](#),” which argues that Canada’s strong socialized medicine and affordable education system has given the country a sense of fairness and equal opportunity, inoculating it against populism.

“People are tired, they are angry,” said Mr. Summerville, a former investment banker in Victoria, British Columbia. “This is a very specific moment that has to do with people feeling very uncomfortable for the last two years, because of the pandemic.”

The unrest has infuriated many Ottawa residents, who have led counterprotests against what they view as an intimidating occupation of their city. But they have also drawn huge crowds of supporters, particularly on the weekends, when the downtown has been turned into what feels like a raucous tailgate party, alternative news convention and brewing witch hunt, all at the same time.

Strangers stop for impromptu conversations, hug and beam at one another, smiling widely — which after two years of mask wearing offers an emotional balm. One woman paraded the streets with a sign exhorting people to show her their teeth.

It does not take long to hear stories of personal suffering, and to understand why an ordinarily rule-abiding people might decide that a little rebellion is called for.

“Every single one of these people, has been catastrophically hurt,” said Mr. Rowe, the protester, lowering his megaphone for a moment. A Bikram Yoga instructor from the city of Kingston, two hours away, Mr. Rowe listed his losses over the past two years, tears brimming in his eyes: his home, his business and half of his retirement savings. And then there was the death of his brother-in-law.

“The suffering has gotten to a level where they have nothing to lose,” he said.

	<p>Compared with many countries, Canada was let off easy by Covid, with far fewer deaths per capita than the United States. But it came at a heavy cost.</p> <p>Restrictions have been heavy and long. Almost two years after the pandemic hit Canada, the country remains in various stages of lockdown, with indoor dining banned in the country's two largest provinces, Ontario and Quebec, until only recently. Residents of old-age homes were locked in for the better part of a year across the country. Students in Ontario missed more in-class learning than anywhere in North America, local newspapers state.</p> <p>Recent polls show that most Canadians disagree with the tactics of the so-called freedom convoy, and worry that the country's democracy is being threatened. But, many feel sympathy for protesters, particularly younger Canadians.</p> <p>"Imagine storm clouds on horizon," said Darrell Bricker, chief executive of the polling company Ipsos Public Affairs. "That has to discharge somewhere. This is part of the discharge."</p> <p>Among those people watching the scenes unfold in Ottawa is one of the city's two poet laureates, Albert Dumont. An Algonquin elder, Mr. Dumont rejects not just the protesters' notion of freedom, given its effect on local residents, but the whole idea that Canada was ever particularly nice, or even tolerant.</p> <p>"My dad didn't get to vote until 1960 — that's not long ago," he said. "There was a time when Canada was ugly and very cruel to Indigenous people."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 California school mask mandate continues
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/14/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#california-will-extend-its-mask-requirement-in-schools-even-as-it-eases-other-mandates
GIST	<p>SACRAMENTO — California state's health authorities said on Monday that although the state is easing some pandemic restrictions, mask requirements for schoolchildren will remain for at least another two weeks.</p> <p>The announcement by Dr. Mark Ghaly, the state's top health official, came as cases are plummeting in California and elsewhere and Democratic-run states have begun to shift away from emergency pandemic measures and toward more long-term strategies for living with the virus.</p> <p>Last week, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced that California has "a date with destiny," and set a Feb. 15 deadline for lifting the statewide requirement that vaccinated people wear masks in indoor public spaces. Unvaccinated people still will be required to wear masks.</p> <p>But as in other states, masks have remained a contentious issue, with unionized school employees pushing for continuing mask requirements as a workplace protection against unvaccinated children and a vocal minority of parents arguing that the masks are uncomfortable and possibly detrimental for children.</p> <p>Dr. Ghaly said that California's school mask mandates will remain at least until Feb. 28, at which point health authorities will reassess, based on the levels of new infections, pediatric hospitalizations, case positivity rates, vaccination rates and other metrics.</p> <p>"Masking has been a valuable tool to keep schools functioning when transmission is high," Dr. Ghaly said, noting that California has had only 1 percent of the nation's school closures despite having 12 percent of U.S. schoolchildren.</p> <p>But, Dr. Ghaly added, "masking requirements were never put in place to be there forever."</p> <p>"It's not question of 'if,'" he said, referring to the end of mask mandates. "It's a question of when."</p>

California is among a number of [Democratic-led states phasing out some restrictions](#) as the pandemic's political dynamics have begun to shift. New York, Illinois and other states also have announced an easing of some measures, but officials have [approached school policies more cautiously](#).

About 70 percent of Californians [are fully vaccinated](#), and [new coronavirus cases](#) have fallen 70 percent over the past 14 days. Hospitalizations are down 36 percent. But cases remain high and local health authorities have varied in their willingness to ease restrictions.

The public health chief in Los Angeles, Dr. Barbara Ferrer, has said it may take weeks or months for infection rates to fall to a point where it is safe to lift that county's indoor mask mandate. While most of the Bay Area health officials have said they will follow the state's timeline in letting their indoor mask mandates expire on Tuesday, the public health director in Santa Clara County, Dr. Sara Cody, specified a number of health metrics that must first be met.

More than six million children are enrolled in K-12 school in California. State law requires them to be vaccinated against Covid as a condition of in-person attendance unless they have medical issues or "personal beliefs" that preclude vaccines.

State lawmakers are working to end the personal-belief exemption, as they did several years ago for vaccines against other contagious diseases such as whooping cough and measles. Less than a third of children aged 5 to 11 are vaccinated against the coronavirus in California.

School employees and parents of immunocompromised children have argued that the gaps in vaccine coverage, along with the general close quarters in classrooms, pose a hazard and have urged state officials to continue requiring masks.

Meanwhile, a statewide organization of parents opposed to school masking rebuked the delay.

"Our children have not had a normal in-person educational experience in almost two years," said Megan Bacigalupi, executive director of California Parent Power. "It's way past time to allow them to see their friends' and teachers' faces."

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HEADLINE	02/14 NYC fires 1,430 workers; vaccine mandate
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/14/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#nyc-vaccine-mandate
GIST	<p>New York City fired 1,430 city workers on Friday for failing to comply with its vaccine mandate, a figure that represent less than 1 percent of the city's work force, but likely the nation's largest mass termination of municipal employees in response to a Covid vaccine mandate.</p> <p>Mayor Eric Adams announced on Monday that 1,428 workers, who had already been on unpaid leave for months, were sent termination notices after they failed to receive a first dose of the vaccine. Two newer hires, who faced more stringent requirements, were also fired for failing to receive two vaccine doses. Nearly 4,000 city workers had faced a deadline of Friday to comply with the vaccine mandate.</p> <p>Mr. Adams celebrated that many of the city's 370,000 workers got vaccinated by the deadline. About 95 percent of the city's workers have received at least one dose of the vaccine, an increase from 84 percent when the mandate was first announced in October.</p> <p>"Our goal was always to vaccinate, not terminate, and city workers stepped up and met the goal placed before them," Mr. Adams said in a statement on Monday.</p> <p>Many medical experts say mandates have been effective in persuading more people to get vaccinated, which they say is essential to helping prevent the spread of the virus. Mandates at companies and elsewhere have been typically successful once implemented, including at private companies like Tyson Foods.</p>

Return to Top	<p>About 900 of the fired staff worked at the Department of Education; about 100 worked at the New York City Housing Authority, the public housing agency; 36 were from the New York Police Department.</p> <p>More city workers could still face dismissal. About 9,000 additional city workers are still unvaccinated, but are seeking exemptions, or working with unions to avoid terminations.</p> <p>All city workers are required to receive one dose of the vaccine. New hires must get two doses if they received a vaccine that includes a second dose. Booster shots are not required, but Mr. Adams has said he was considering the idea.</p> <p>Vaccination rates among city agencies have been uneven. The Police Department and Correction Department have the lowest rates with 88 percent of workers who have received at least one dose.</p> <p>Of all the city workers who were fired on Friday, only the two new hires were working last week, and more than 99 percent of new hires got vaccinated and kept their jobs, city officials said.</p> <p>The city vaccine mandate for municipal workers was put in place by Mr. Adams's predecessor, Bill de Blasio.</p> <p>Opponents of the mandate faced a series of legal defeats, the last being the U.S. Supreme Court's rejection on Friday of an emergency request that it consider an appeal by a group of city teachers.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 DC drops indoor mask, vaccine mandates
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/14/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#washington-dc-will-drop-its-indoor-mask-and-vaccine-mandates
GIST	<p>Rapidly decreasing counts of new coronavirus cases have spurred the officials leading Washington, D.C., and Maryland to announce the loosening of pandemic restrictions. Their moves on Monday followed the actions of several governors across the United States last week to start lifting indoor mask mandates.</p> <p>In Washington, Mayor Muriel E. Bowser said that beginning Tuesday, people will no longer have to show proof of at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccination before entering many businesses in the city. The rule was imposed in December after the Omicron variant emerged.</p> <p>In addition, the city will end on March 1 its mandate that masks be worn in bars, gyms, houses of worship, restaurants, and stores. Crucially, masks will still be required in schools, libraries, child-care centers, emergency shelters and public transit facilities.</p> <p>New confirmed cases have dropped 51 percent over the last two weeks in Washington, according to a New York Times database, and hospitalizations have dropped 40 percent in the same time period. About 70 percent of the district's residents are fully vaccinated.</p> <p>"We've seen a precipitous drop in case levels for Omicron, and this is where we've landed," Ms. Bowser, a Democrat, said at a news conference. "What we know is that we have to be nimble if something should change, like it changed in December with a new, very contagious variant."</p> <p>President Biden recently said that it was probably still too soon to lift indoor mask mandates, though he acknowledged that it was a "tough call." "All the variants have had a profound impact on the psyche of the American people," he told Lester Holt of NBC News.</p> <p>In Maryland, Gov. Larry Hogan said that the mask mandate for state office buildings will end on Feb. 22. He has also called on the state board of education to rescind its school mask policy.</p>

Mr. Hogan, a Republican, pointed to greatly reduced transmission and infection and the widespread availability of vaccines for children 5 or older. He added that Covid hospitalizations in Maryland had dropped below 1,000. Last month, the figure peaked at close to 3,700, according to a New York Times database. In Maryland, 73 percent of residents are fully vaccinated.

The governor lifted the state's indoor mask requirement for most public places last May, but the state's schools are governed independently. "I think it's safe enough for our kids to just try to get back to normal," [he said on the CNN program "State of the Union" on Sunday](#).

Officials in some cities, counties and school districts have indicated that they would keep their own mandates in place after statewide mandates end, adding to confusion across the country.

A [CBS poll](#) taken last week found that a majority of Americans still support mask mandates, including in schools, but that [many are exhausted and frustrated](#) generally by the pandemic.

Public health experts agree that mask requirements in schools should not last forever, [but some experts say that lifting school mask mandates too early](#) could jeopardize the progress made over the last few weeks as new case reports declined.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Sweden: 4th vax shot for people 80, older
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/world/europe/sweden-fourth-covid-vaccine-older-people.html
GIST	<p>Sweden's public health agency recommended on Monday that people 80 and over receive a second booster dose of coronavirus vaccine, which would be a fourth overall shot. It also warned, as the country removes its pandemic restrictions, that the virus is spreading increasingly among people who are at elevated risk of severe illness.</p> <p>The country is among the few places to recommend a fourth dose as a booster, beyond the initial shots and one booster that experts say most adults should receive.</p> <p>Data published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last week suggested that the added protection from booster shots tends to diminish significantly after about four months, raising the possibility that people who would be at high risk of serious complications or death if they contracted Covid-19 may need another dose.</p> <p>Before Omicron emerged, officials and scientists debated whether boosters were necessary or advisable for people of various ages as a wide swath of nations authorized them anyway. But there was a broad shift in that thinking as Omicron, which evades immune defenses better than previous variants, swept the world, leading to more support for boosters.</p> <p>"We believe that people who are 80 years and older will benefit" from a second booster dose, said Anders Tegnell, chief epidemiologist at Sweden's public health agency.</p> <p>Some scientists argue that trying to give everyone another shot every few months is unrealistic, and that booster efforts should be focused instead on older adults — who appear to get the most benefit from boosters, according to C.D.C. data — and on people who are especially vulnerable because they have weakened immune systems or live in long-term care facilities like nursing homes.</p> <p>Both vaccines in use in Sweden — those developed by Moderna and by Pfizer and BioNTech — are usually administered in two initial doses a few weeks apart. Seventy-three percent of Swedish residents are considered fully vaccinated, or having received the initial two doses, according to the Our World in Data project at the University of Oxford.</p>

	<p>Many countries recommend that people with compromised immune systems receive three shots for their initial vaccination, instead of two. Booster shots would then be advised for those people on the same basis as for people who received the standard two-dose initial vaccination.</p> <p>Recent studies have found that an initial vaccination alone, without boosters, remains strongly protective against severe illness and death in most people, including against Omicron, even though its effectiveness against infection declines over time.</p> <p>Sweden has eased or lifted most of its pandemic restrictions this month, including work-from-home requirements and limits on the size of gatherings. Like many countries, Sweden saw a huge surge in daily reports of new cases in January, propelled by the Omicron variant; more recently the figure has been falling, though it remains high.</p> <p>Along with all people 80 or older, Sweden is recommending that others who live in nursing homes or who receive assisted-living services at home should also receive a second booster dose, at least four months after their first one, the country's health agency said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 US closes embassy Kyiv; relocate to Lviv
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/world/europe/us-closing-kyiv-embassy.html
GIST	<p>The United States is temporarily closing its embassy in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital and moving embassy operations to Lviv, a city much farther from Russian territory, the State Department said on Monday, citing the Russian military buildup near Ukraine.</p> <p>The department had said on Saturday that it would move most of its diplomatic staff in Kyiv to Lviv, but not all, indicating that it would keep the embassy operating. A department spokesman, Ned Price, declined to say at a news briefing on Monday how many people remained in Kyiv and were covered by the decision to shut the embassy.</p> <p>Amid fears of a Russian invasion, the United States has strongly urged its citizens to leave Ukraine and has ordered some personnel and their families out of the country.</p> <p>Kyiv lies within easy reach of Russian forces massed in western Russia and in Belarus. Lviv sits nearly 300 miles farther west, close to Ukraine's border with Poland.</p> <p>"I have no higher priority than the safety and security of Americans around the world, and that, of course, includes our colleagues serving at our posts overseas," Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said in a statement.</p> <p>"With that in mind," he added, "we are in the process of temporarily relocating our Embassy operations in Ukraine from our Embassy in Kyiv to Lviv due to the dramatic acceleration in the buildup of Russian forces. The Embassy will remain engaged with the Ukrainian government, coordinating diplomatic engagement in Ukraine."</p> <p>Mr. Blinken said: "The path for diplomacy remains available if Russia chooses to engage in good faith. We look forward to returning our staff to the Embassy as soon as conditions permit."</p> <p>Among those who have already relocated to Lviv, Mr. Price said, is Kristina A. Kvien, the embassy's chargé d'affaires — the person in charge of an embassy when no ambassador is present. He said Ukrainian police would protect the compound in Kyiv.</p> <p>"It is certainly our intention to return to that Embassy in Kyiv just as soon as it is safe for us to do so," Mr. Price said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Russia will withdraw some troops off border
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/15/russia-ukraine-border-troops-withdrawal
GIST	<p>Russia's defence ministry has announced it is to withdraw some of its troops from the border with Ukraine in a possible de-escalation of the threat of a potential invasion.</p> <p>The size of the withdrawal remains unclear and may involve only a fraction of Russia's forces at the Ukrainian border, which western officials estimate at more than 60% of the country's ground forces.</p> <p>The announcement of the withdrawal came in a statement from the defence ministry spokesperson Igor Konashenkov, who described ongoing exercises that involved forces from "practically all military districts, fleets, and the airborne forces".</p> <p>"Units of the southern and western military districts, which have accomplished their missions, are boarding trains and trucks and will head for their garrisons later today," Konashenkov said in the statement.</p> <p>The defence ministry also released a video of Russian tanks and other heavy weaponry being loaded on to railway cars, the Interfax news service reported.</p> <p>Russia's rouble currency reportedly posted gains following the announcement, indicating that investors hoped this would mark the beginning of a de-escalation of tensions between Russia and the west.</p> <p>Russia has previously announced the conclusion of military exercises near the Ukrainian border, but social media and satellite photography taken in the following days have not shown considerable changes to Russia's force posture. Those exercises involved only a small number of troops.</p> <p>Many of the troops located close to the Ukrainian border are not involved in any formal training. When questioned on the buildup, Russia has said it has the right to move troops as it wishes within its own territory.</p> <p>Russia is holding large joint exercises with Belarus scheduled to end on 20 February. Western countries have warned that those drills could be used as cover to prepare for an attack on Ukraine, while Russia has said those troops will return to base once the exercises have concluded.</p> <p>Russian government officials moved quickly to accuse the west of hysteria and argue that the withdrawal of troops showed that Nato warnings of an invasion were spurious.</p> <p>"15 February 2022 will go into history as the day western war propaganda failed," Maria Zakharova, the Russian foreign ministry spokesperson, wrote in a Facebook post after the announcement. "They have been disgraced and destroyed without a single shot being fired."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Canada emergency powers to quell protests
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/canada-protest-police-reopen-border-bridge-6520c4d63add7a9d9342cffde1e4190e
GIST	<p>OTTAWA, Ontario (AP) — Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invoked emergency powers Monday to quell the paralyzing protests by truckers and others angry over Canada's COVID-19 restrictions, outlining plans not only to tow away their rigs but to strike at their bank accounts and their livelihoods.</p> <p>"These blockades are illegal, and if you are still participating, the time to go home is now," he declared.</p> <p>In invoking Canada's Emergencies Act, which gives the federal government broad powers to restore order, Trudeau ruled out using the military.</p> <p>His government instead threatened to tow away vehicles to keep essential services running; freeze truckers' personal and corporate bank accounts; and suspend the insurance on their rigs.</p>

“Consider yourselves warned,” Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said. “Send your rigs home.”

Freeland, who is also the finance minister, said the government will also broaden its anti-money-laundering regulations to target crowd-funding sites that are being used to support the illegal blockades.

Trudeau did not indicate when the new crackdowns would begin. But he gave assurances the emergency measures “will be time-limited, geographically targeted, as well as reasonable and proportionate to the threats they are meant to address.”

For more than two weeks, hundreds and sometimes thousands of protesters in trucks and other vehicles have clogged the streets of Ottawa, the capital, and besieged Parliament Hill, railing against vaccine mandates for truckers and other COVID-19 precautions and condemning Trudeau’s Liberal government.

Members of the self-styled Freedom Convoy have also blockaded various U.S.-Canadian border crossings, though the busiest and most important — the Ambassador Bridge connecting Windsor, Ontario, to Detroit — was reopened on Sunday after police arrested dozens of demonstrators and broke the nearly week-long siege that had disrupted auto production in both countries.

“This is the biggest, greatest, most severe test Trudeau has faced,” said Wesley Wark, a University of Ottawa professor and national security expert.

Invoking the Emergencies Act would allow the government to declare the Ottawa protest illegal and clear it out by such means as towing vehicles, Wark said. It would also enable the government to make greater use of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the federal police agency.

One of the protest organizers in Ottawa vowed not to back down in the face of pressure from the government.

“There are no threats that will frighten us. We will hold the line,” Tamara Lich said.

Cadalin Valcea, a truck driver from Montreal protesting for more than two weeks, said he will move move only if forced: “We want only one thing: to finish with this lockdown and these restrictions.”

Trudeau met virtually with leaders of the country’s provinces before announcing the crackdown.

Doug Ford, the Conservative premier of Ontario, which is Canada’s most populous province and includes Ottawa and Windsor, expressed support for emergency action, saying: “We need law and order. Our country is at risk now.”

But the leaders of other provinces warned the prime minister against taking such a step, some of them cautioning it could inflame an already dangerous situation.

“At this point, it would not help the social climate. There is a lot of pressure, and I think we have to be careful,” said Quebec Premier François Legault. “It wouldn’t help for the polarization.”

The protests have drawn support from right-wing extremists and armed citizens in Canada, and have been cheered on in the U.S. by Fox News personalities and conservatives such as Donald Trump.

Some conservatives pushed Trudeau to simply drop the pandemic mandates.

“He’s got protests right around the country, and now he’s dropping in the polls, desperately trying to save his political career. The solution is staring him in the face,” said opposition Conservative lawmaker Pierre Poilievre, who is running for the party’s leadership.

Millions in donations have poured in supporting the protests, including a big chunk from the U.S.

Hackers who apparently infiltrated one of fundraising websites, GiveSendGo.com, dumped a file online that showed a tally of nearly 93,000 donations totaling \$8.4 million through Thursday, an Associated Press analysis of the data found.

Roughly 40% of the money raised came from the U.S. while slightly over half was from Canada.

In other developments, the Mounties said they arrested 11 people at the blockaded border crossing at Coutts, Alberta, opposite Montana, after learning of a cache of guns and ammunition.

Police said a small group within the protest was said to have a “willingness to use force against the police if any attempts were made to disrupt the blockade.” Authorities seized long guns, handguns, body armor and a large quantity of ammunition.

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney also said protesters in a tractor and a heavy-duty truck tried to ram a police vehicle at Coutts on Sunday night and fled. He said some protesters want to “take this in a very dangerous and dark direction.”

Over the past weeks, authorities have hesitated to move against the protesters. Local officials cited a lack of police manpower and fears of violence, while provincial and federal authorities disagreed over who had responsibility for quelling the unrest.

An earlier version of the Emergencies Act, called the War Measures Act, was used just once during peacetime, by Trudeau’s late father, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, to deal with a militant Quebec independence movement in 1970.

The demonstrations have inspired similar convoys in France, New Zealand and the Netherlands. U.S. authorities have said that truck convoys may be in the works in the United States.

Invoking emergency powers would be a signal to Canadians and allies like the United States and around the world “who are wondering what the hell has Canada been up to,” Wark said.

Also Monday, Ontario’s premier announced that on March 1, the province will lift its requirement that people show proof of vaccination to get into restaurants, restaurants, gyms and sporting events. The surge of cases caused by the omicron variant has crested in Canada.

“We are moving in this direction because it is safe to do so. Today’s announcement is not because of what’s happening in Ottawa or Windsor but despite it,” Ford said.

The Ambassador Bridge, which carries 25% of all trade between the two countries, reopened to traffic late Sunday night. The interruption forced General Motors, Ford, Toyota and other automakers to close plants or curtail production on both sides of the border. Some of them have yet to get back to full production.

The siege in Ottawa, about 470 miles (750 kilometers) away, has infuriated residents fed up with government inaction. They have complained of being harassed and intimidated by the protesters who have parked their rigs bumper to bumper on the streets.

“It’s stressful. I feel angry at what’s happening. This isn’t Canada. This does not represent us,” Colleen Sinclair, a counter-protester who lives in Ottawa.

Many of Canada’s COVID-19 restrictions, such as mask rules and vaccine passports for getting into restaurants and theaters, are already falling away as the omicron surge levels off.

Pandemic restrictions have been far stricter in Canada than in the U.S., but Canadians have largely supported them. The vast majority of Canadians are vaccinated.

HEADLINE	02/14 UW unwittingly helped body broker scandal
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/investigations/university-of-washington-unknowingly-helped-jailed-body-broker/281-3ff84ae2-7658-420a-a2b9-b054601e77d5
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A KING 5 investigation found that the largest medical school in the Northwest unwittingly helped supply donated human bodies to a former Seattle man who is now facing criminal charges.</p> <p>Walter Mitchell, who operated FutureGenex, is in jail in Yavapai County, Arizona facing trial on 29 counts of abandonment or concealment of a dead body.</p> <p>FutureGenex, which folded in February of 2020, according to court records, was a for-profit company that solicited donations of human bodies in exchange for paying the costs of cremation and other death-related services.</p> <p>FutureGenex explained to donors that the company sold their bodies, or parts of them, for use at medical seminars, private educational facilities, and medical device manufacturing firms.</p> <p>KING 5's investigation found Walter Mitchell worked himself into a position where his company would be next in line to receive donated bodies that were rejected by the prestigious University of Washington School of Medicine.</p> <p>"That really bothers me," said Cheryl Patterson, whose ex-husband Doug Patterson signed up with the university's "Willed Body Program" before he died in 2019.</p> <p>Doug Patterson's remains were found dumped in the desert near Prescott, Arizona in December 2020, along with the body parts of several other people.</p> <p>"For the University of Washington, who is respected you know, the medical school ... for them to be so careless, I don't get it," she said.</p> <p>The UW School of Medicine accepts body donations so that medical students can learn real-world anatomy during their studies.</p> <p>Douglas Patterson's death from heart failure at age 59 provides the template of how Mitchell obtained bodies through the UW.</p> <p>When the Camano Island man died on April 22, 2019, his family did as instructed and called the University's "Willed Body Hotline" to report his death.</p> <p>The person that answered the phone said the university was rejecting Patterson's donation because of several disqualifying medical conditions, which his family said they were warned of in advance.</p> <p>"They said they couldn't take him, and they recommended this other place," Cheryl Patterson said.</p> <p>The other place was FutureGenex. The family signed a donation contract the next day with Walter Mitchell that said Doug's body would be used by "third parties" for "education and training, scientific advancement, and/or research and development purposes."</p> <p>The family received an urn, purportedly filled with ashes from Doug's body parts that were not used, a few weeks later and thought that his wish to further science and medicine had been granted.</p> <p>But then, the Washington State Patrol came calling in early 2021.</p> <p>Documents obtained by the KING 5 Investigators through a public records request show that Yavapai County Sheriff's detectives forwarded the state patrol the names of 13 Washington state residents who had donated their bodies to FutureGenEx.</p>

The people were potential victims whose body parts had been dumped in two remote locations in Yavapai County that were discovered in the days after Christmas 2020. Investigators found medical tags and labels near five human heads that were left in one location and arms, legs, knees, and feet that were left in another.

The medical information on those tags led investigators to Walter Mitchell, who they learned had closed FutureGenex in Seattle, and moved to Arizona allegedly with at least five bodies packed in cold storage.

Police records say Mitchell refused to speak with investigators when they questioned him at his home in Chino Valley, Arizona. He was arrested and charged with abusing the bodies and for possession of a pipe bomb, which authorities said they found during a search of his apartment.

Mitchell pleaded “not guilty” to all charges and his lawyer refused to discuss the case.

Meanwhile, Washington State Patrol detectives fanned out to get DNA samples from blood relatives of the 13 known victims in Washington to see if any of them matched the DNA from the body parts found in the desert.

Cheryl Patterson said her son’s DNA was a match to some of the body parts, confirming that Mitchell had allegedly dumped parts of Doug’s donated body in the Arizona desert.

“He’s an evil man. I think he’s evil,” Patterson said.

The University of Washington School of Medicine agreed to an on-camera interview with the KING 5 Investigators to explain its connection to Walter Mitchell. But the night before the scheduled interview, Media Relations Director Susan Gregg canceled, saying in an email “We don’t believe that an interview with our faculty would add any additional context to your story...”

Instead, the school released a statement.

“We cannot imagine the grief and suffering that these families have experienced over this heinous incident,” the university said in the written statement.

It then deflected blame to a private contractor.

“It is not our practice to provide the names of other programs...” when a donor is rejected by the university. “After hearing about this tragic incident, we discovered that against our established practice, our contracted transport and after-hours answering service provided names of other whole body donation programs...” the statement said.

The contractor, a funeral services company in Kent called First Call Plus run by Steve Webster, did not return repeated calls seeking comment. The UW says it still uses First Call Plus to answer its phone lines and transport bodies.

Using police and court records, KING 5 was able to identify and contact several of the 13 potential victims in the Arizona case.

Four families reported that they or their loved ones had signed up with the University of Washington’s [Willed Body Program](#), which had rejected the donation upon death. Like the Patterson family, they called the hotline and believed they were talking to a university representative who rejected the donation. And, when that person recommended Walter Mitchell, they believed it meant that FutureGenex had the prestigious university’s seal of approval.

“If they’re going to give the name out, you would hope that they had done some sort of business or background (check) or something. This is serious business,” Cheryl Patterson said.

There were red flags for Walter Mitchell long before his ties to the University of Washington.

Court records show a 1993 felony conviction in which Mitchell stole money from an employer and fled to Mexico.

In 2014, the Phoenix body broker Mitchell worked for, Biological Resource Center, was raided by the FBI for lying to donors and mishandling body parts. Agents found rotting and mislabeled body parts and the head of a woman sewn onto a man's body, among other abuses.

Owner Stephen Gore was charged and convicted. Mitchell was not charged and there is no record that he was accused of a crime.

The final red flag for the university should have been its statements in 2006.

That's when the KING 5 Investigators aired a story on Biogift. It was one of the first private, for-profit "whole body donation" firms to open its doors in the Pacific Northwest. It was a novel concept and one that potentially competed with the university's donation program.

Biogift's owner at the time – Walter Mitchell – refused to speak with KING 5 for the story.

Biogift still operates in Washington state, but the company says Mitchell sold the company more than a decade ago and has no more involvement.

In 2006, the head of the UW's Willed Body Program Dr. Dan Graney, said the unregulated "body broker" industry posed a threat to all the non-profits that seek donations.

"It's always a matter of the next newspaper or TV broadcast that's going to influence people to say, 'You know, I'm not going to trust those people and I'm not going to donate my body and at that time we're in real trouble,'" Dr. Graney said in the broadcast.

It's unclear how many bodies Mitchell received through his back-door link to the University of Washington.

"You trust them to take your loved one and treat them with respect, and that's not at all what happened," Cheryl Patterson said.

Interested in body donation?

The American Association of Tissue Banks warns there are many firms that accept whole body donations in the US. But only seven of them are accredited by the AATB.

This means that participating donation firms must: allow independent inspections of their facilities, maintain sufficient records and prove that they are providing a supply of safe, donated human tissue.

[Find a list of accredited body donation companies here.](#)

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HEADLINE	02/14 Hospitals stuck in staffing crisis
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/washington-hospitals-stuck-staffing-crisis/LSTOIGPTOBFQDJ22J5GYB65CY/
GIST	SEATTLE — As COVID-19 case counts continue to drop, Washington hospitals remain stuck in a serious staffing crisis. Some nurses say administrators at local hospitals are putting their bottom lines before patient safety.

	<p>Harborview Medical Center nurse Sam Conley said after two years of the pandemic, the burnout is real.</p> <p>Of the 120,000 nurses licensed in Washington, only half are working.</p> <p>Conley said travel nurses are getting paid double to fill in as needed.</p> <p>“We do not have a shortage of nurses willing to work. We have a shortage of nurses willing to work in these conditions,” said Conley.</p> <p>Conley said everything has been tried at the hospital level to bring about change, with no progress. At this point, solutions need to come from the Legislature.</p> <p>House Bill 1868 is on its way to the Senate.</p> <p>The bill contains provisions to improve worker safety and patient care and enforce existing break and overtime laws for nurses.</p> <p>Conley said a similar bill passed in California and is already improving patient care and dropping mortality rates.</p> <p>According to a release from House Democrats, a poll revealed that more than 80% of health care workers reported being burned out while 49% said they might quit the health care industry. When asked why they might quit, more than 70% specified that a shortage in staffing was a huge reason, the release stated.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Metro drivers frustrated: harassment, drugs
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/king-county-metro-drivers-frustrated-with-drug-use-harassment-on-buses
GIST	<p>Ken Bryant doesn't have to look back too far to show just how bad it's gotten for him as a Metro bus operator.</p> <p>“It was last week where a guy got on and he literally just got on and blatantly pulled out his foil,” he said. “It’s out of control man. People are blatantly just coming on the buses and just smoking whatever.”</p> <p>It's been an ongoing problem he said keeps getting worse. He's not alone in thinking that.</p> <p>Multiple bus drivers who didn't want to go on camera shared the same sentiment, saying they have been harassed, assaulted and have had to deal with passengers drug use while on duty.</p> <p>“We didn’t come into the job having to deal with this,” Bryant said.</p> <p>So much so that some drivers said they are looking for other places to work.</p> <p>“We have members calling, crying, breaking down saying we can’t do this no more, this job,” said Ron Anderson, vice president of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587.</p> <p>It's why Anderson wants to see action taken to protect their members.</p> <p>“I think it’s a very simple ask,” Anderson said. “Spirits are real low and morale is real low out there.”</p> <p>KOMO News spoke with Terry White, King County Metro’s general manager, who said the operators have every right to feel this way.</p> <p>“The goal on our end is to make sure that all our folks are going home safe,” he said.</p>

	<p>According to White, adding security is one way they are looking to provide further protection for those drivers.</p> <p>“The best thing we can do to boost morale is to increase and boost and ensure we have presence in the system to show that we’re there to care,” White said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Gas prices Washington, Oregon 10yr-high
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/local/oregon-high-gas-prices/283-b56fa926-a8fc-4bf1-a201-148e528d4aee
GIST	<p>PORTLAND, Ore. — Gas prices are at a 10-year high and the average prices in Oregon and Washington are some of the highest in the nation.</p> <p>For Maria Meyers' family of six in Beaverton, rising gas prices are on the radar. One of her children is already driving and another is about to learn.</p> <p>"It's definitely starting to make me think twice about things," Meyers said while refueling in downtown Portland.</p> <p>Although Oregon saw the lowest weekly increase in the cost of gasoline this past week, Washington and Oregon have the third and fourth highest average gas prices in the nation respectively, according to data compiled by AAA. As of Feb. 14, both states had average gas prices just under \$4.00/gallon.</p> <p>"We're all feeling pain at the pumps these days," said Marie Dodds, director of government and public affairs for AAA of Oregon/Idaho.</p> <p>Dodds said crude oil production took a hit at the beginning of the pandemic. With more people staying home and fewer people driving, demand for oil and gasoline decreased.</p> <p>"Crude oil production is not where it was before the pandemic," Dodds said. "Labor shortages, supply chain issues—this industry is also impacted by that."</p> <p>However, demand has rebounded and is now strong again.</p> <p>"And it's one of those things where you can't just flip a switch and magically have crude oil back where it was," Dodds said. "So we're feeling the pain as the industry grows again and tries to catch up with demand."</p> <p>As of this week, crude oil is \$93 per barrel, up \$35 from last year. Dodds said crude oil accounts for 53% of the cost of gasoline.</p> <p>"It's the main ingredient in that gallon of gas or diesel," she said.</p> <p>Part of the problem lies in growing tensions with Russia, which is a big producer of crude oil.</p> <p>Russian troops have amassed outside Ukraine and intelligence leaders worry Russia may try to invade the country. The conflict and possibility of retaliatory US sanctions against Russia are pushing crude oil prices even higher.</p> <p>"Russia could withhold crude oil from the already tight global market," Dodds explained.</p> <p>AAA said gas prices will likely climb further in the first half of the year toward summer before eventually coming back down in the third and fourth quarters of the year.</p> <p>"So it's going to be a really bumpy ride until then," Dodds said.</p> <p>Dodds noted predictions are uncertain since many factors could change.</p>

	<p>In the meantime, drivers are urged to conserve gasoline.</p> <p>"Taking stuff out of your car, combining trips, driving less, if you have more than one vehicle in the home, use the vehicle that gets the best gas mileage for those trips," Dodds suggested.</p> <p>With problems half a world away, local drivers acknowledged the prices are beyond their control.</p> <p>"I would hope that it would level out," Meyers said. "But this is just life."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Tone of the crisis over Ukraine shifts
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/world/europe/ukraine-russia-putin-zelensky-scholz-nato.html
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — The tone of the crisis over Ukraine shifted Monday as Russia’s top diplomat endorsed more talks to resolve its standoff with the West, and Ukrainian officials hinted at offering concessions to avert war — even as Russian warships massed off Ukraine’s Black Sea coast and Russian ground troops appeared poised to strike.</p> <p>In stage-managed, televised meetings, the Kremlin sent its strongest signals yet that it would seek further negotiations with the West rather than launch immediate military action. State television showed Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov telling President Vladimir V. Putin there was still a diplomatic path ahead. Minutes later, it showed Defense Minister Sergei K. Shoigu telling Mr. Putin that what he characterized as “large-scale drills” around Ukraine were coming to an end.</p> <p>“I believe that our possibilities are far from exhausted,” Mr. Lavrov said, referring to Russia’s negotiations with the West. “I would propose continuing and intensifying them.”</p> <p>Mr. Putin responded ambiguously: “Good.”</p> <p>It was a sign that the Kremlin was still holding out the possibility that it could use its troop buildup to achieve key objectives without military action. The prospect for such a scenario was bolstered in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, where President Volodymyr Zelensky left open the possibility of dropping his country’s ambition to join the NATO alliance — a move that would help fulfill one of Mr. Putin’s key demands.</p> <p>At a news conference, Mr. Zelensky emphasized that NATO membership was “for our security,” with the goal of joining the alliance written into the country’s constitution. But he acknowledged the difficult place the country found itself in, nearly completely encircled by Russian forces and with partners like the United States insisting they would not send troops into Ukraine to repel a Russian invasion.</p> <p>“How much should Ukraine go on that path?” Mr. Zelensky said of NATO membership. “Who will support us?”</p> <p>The prospect of Ukraine joining NATO, he posited, could be “like a dream.”</p> <p>Mr. Zelensky spoke alongside Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany, the latest Western leader trying shuttle diplomacy to avert war. The flurry of diplomacy came as fears of war have caused oil prices to spike, pushing well past \$90 a barrel.</p> <p>“If Russia violates the territorial integrity of Ukraine again, we know what to do,” Mr. Scholz said. “In the event of military escalation, we are ready for very far-reaching and effective sanctions in coordination with our allies.”</p> <p>Mr. Scholz will fly to Moscow on Tuesday for crisis talks with Mr. Putin, following up on last week’s Kremlin visit by President Emmanuel Macron of France. Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau of Poland — a country that is one of Russia’s most vocal critics in Europe — was also scheduled to visit Moscow on</p>

Tuesday to meet with his Russian counterpart, Mr. Lavrov. And Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio of Italy prepared to depart for his own Eastern European tour, which will bring him to Kyiv on Tuesday and Moscow on Wednesday.

Because of the continuing crisis, the United States is temporarily closing its embassy in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, and moving its operations to Lviv, a city much farther from Russian territory, the State Department said.

In Mr. Lavrov's televised meeting with Mr. Putin, he highlighted the West's diplomatic frenzy as a sign that the Kremlin's strategy of pairing negotiations with military pressure was working. Mr. Putin laid out that strategy in an address to Russian diplomats in November: it was good that "tensions" were high with the West, the president told them, and it was "important for them to remain in this state for as long as possible."

And he directed his diplomats to demand "security guarantees" from the West, such as a legally binding pledge that Ukraine will never join the NATO alliance.

"Our initiative," Mr. Lavrov told Mr. Putin, "shook up our Western colleagues and became the reason they have no longer been able to ignore many of our previous appeals."

Mr. Lavrov also said that Russia had prepared a 10-page response in its written back-and-forth with NATO and the United States over the Kremlin's security demands.

Ambiguity about what comes next has been central to Mr. Putin's strategy in the crisis set off by his troop buildup. Western officials warn that an invasion remains a real possibility in the coming days.

In Monday's televised meetings, Mr. Putin did not state his own position, even after his defense minister told him that Russian military exercises were winding down. He did not specify which exercises were ending, but Russia has used the pretext of exercises to move troops and warships from across the country to within striking distance of Ukraine.

"Some of the drills are already ending and some will end soon," Mr. Shoigu said.

"We'll speak in more detail now," Mr. Putin told him, before the Kremlin's video feed ended.

The ambiguity over Russia's intentions is forcing Ukraine and its Western partners to make hard decisions about what concessions to make to prevent an invasion — and causing discord over how seriously to take the threat.

The secretary of Ukraine's security council, Oleksiy Danilov, reiterated the government's position on Monday that an invasion is less likely than how the United States has portrayed it. Such comments are intended to prevent panic among Ukrainians but also might be aimed at easing negotiations with Russia, analysts have said.

"We recognize the risks that exist on the territory of our country," Mr. Danilov said. "But the situation is under complete control. Moreover, we, as of today, do not see that a full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation could happen on the 16th or 17th of this month."

United States officials last week suggested Russian military action could begin within days. "We don't see it," Mr. Danilov said.

On Monday, the State Department recommended that U.S. citizens leave Belarus and Transnistria, a Russian-backed breakaway region in Moldova. Both Belarus and Transnistria neighbor Ukraine.

The State Department also announced late Monday that it was offering \$1 billion in loan guarantees to Kyiv to “bolster Ukraine’s ability to ensure economic stability, growth and prosperity for its people in the face of Russia’s destabilizing behavior.”

The outlines of a possible diplomatic resolution, though still highly ambiguous and with uncertain prospects, arose in media interviews by a senior diplomat and at Mr. Zelensky’s joint news conference with Mr. Scholz.

For Ukraine, joining NATO is an aspiration that was enshrined in its constitution after Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and fomented a war in the country’s east in 2014. But before these events, Ukrainian law formally defined the country as neutral.

At issue is a paradox at the center of the conflict. Western leaders have steadfastly refused to rule out membership for Ukraine under the alliance’s “open door” policy for new members but also say it is a distant prospect. Russia has demanded Ukraine not join NATO, characterizing the neighboring country’s potential membership in the alliance as an existential security threat.

Since December, the Ukrainian government has been quietly pursuing negotiations that could lead to acceptance of some form of neutrality, or another solution more narrowly focused on Russian demands in a cease-fire agreement in the long-running conflict in eastern Ukraine.

In a televised address to the nation on Monday evening, Mr. Zelensky struck a tone that was less dismissive of the threat of Russian military action than his previous comments. Mr. Zelensky said he had declared Wednesday — the date U.S. officials had suggested as a possible date for the start of a Russian incursion — as a day of “national unity.”

Mr. Zelensky said that previous predictions by Western governments of a possible start of war had proven wrong and said there was no reason to worry on Wednesday.

In public, officials including the Ukrainian foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, have rejected concessions as counterproductive and likely only to encourage further Russian aggression. But Vadym Prystaiko, Ukraine’s ambassador to Britain and a former foreign minister under Mr. Zelensky, on Sunday said his government was “flexible in trying to find the best way out” and was considering dropping the country’s NATO ambitions.

He was asked in a BBC interview: “If it averts war, will your country contemplate not joining NATO, dropping that as a goal?”

He replied: “We might, especially being threatened like that, blackmailed like that, and pushed to it.”

His comments caused a stir, and the Ukrainian government quickly sought to clarify the matter. Oleh Nikolenko, the foreign ministry spokesman, tweeted that Mr. Prystaiko’s comments had been reported out of context. “Ukraine’s position remains unchanged,” he said. “The goal of NATO membership is enshrined in the constitution.”

But Mr. Zelensky did not disavow Mr. Prystaiko’s comment. He said it reflected suggestions the Ukrainian government has received including from foreign leaders. These he characterized as “hinting just a tiny bit to Ukraine that it’s possible to not risk it and constantly hit on the question about future membership in the alliance, because these risks are linked to a reaction from Russia.”

About this line of discussion with Ukraine’s Western allies, Mr. Zelensky said, “It seems to me that no one is hiding it anymore.”

Mr. Scholz, standing beside Mr. Zelensky while speaking with reporters, agreed that NATO membership for Ukraine was in any case “not on the agenda” right now.

	<p>The Kremlin spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, speaking before Mr. Zelensky's news conference in Kyiv, welcomed the ambassador's comments while acknowledging the response from the Ukrainian foreign ministry.</p> <p>"Clearly, Ukraine's confirmed rejection of the idea of joining NATO would be a step that would significantly facilitate the formulation of a better response to Russia's concerns," Mr. Peskov said on Monday. But given the confusion around the comments, he added: "We cannot interpret it as a fact that Kyiv's conceptual worldview has changed."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 DOH: 1,410,658 cases, 11,373 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article258396428.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 2,073 new COVID-19 cases Monday.</p> <p>As of Monday, the state's preliminary death tally was 11,373. The confirmed death tally as of Jan. 28 was 11,054. The statewide case total from the illness caused by the coronavirus stood at 1,410,658 cases on Monday.</p> <p>The state logged 5,485 new cases on Saturday and 2,333 new cases on Sunday.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Microsoft, Expedia broadly reopen offices
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/microsoft-to-reopen-washington-offices-this-month/
GIST	<p>In some of the surest steps so far toward a new, post-pandemic normal for the Seattle area, Microsoft and Expedia separately announced plans Monday to broadly reopen their Washington offices.</p> <p>Microsoft is moving its Washington offices to the final stage of its phased reopening plan, effective Feb. 28, the company said Monday. The move opens the door for as many as 57,000 workers to return to offices in Bellevue, Seattle and at the company's Redmond headquarters that have been largely vacant since the COVID-19 pandemic set in two years ago.</p> <p>Expedia, the Seattle-based travel company that employs 3,000 people in the area, will reopen its Interbay headquarters on a hybrid basis starting April 4, a spokesperson said in a statement Monday less than an hour after Microsoft's announcement.</p> <p>News of Microsoft's reopening in particular sent ripples through the Seattle area, where many employers and workers are still debating when — or whether — to go back to the office.</p> <p>"That's a really, really big deal," said Margaret O'Mara, a University of Washington historian who has written extensively about tech hubs like Seattle.</p> <p>Microsoft is not only one of the region's largest employers, O'Mara said, but also was one of the first companies in the world to go remote when COVID hit. She said many other employers will be asking whether this "sends a signal: Is this over? Is this the new normal? Are we on the other side of this?"</p> <p>Microsoft said it will fully open its facilities to employees, visitors and guests, and resume campus services, Executive Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer Chris Capossela announced Monday.</p> <p>But Microsoft's reopening doesn't guarantee all workers will come back full-time. Microsoft said Monday its approach "embraces schedule flexibility as standard for most roles" and that it is allowing managers to approve employee requests to adjust their work site, location or hours.</p> <p>"Throughout the pandemic, our employees have adapted to many new ways of working while helping our customers and partners navigate their own challenges," Capossela said. "We know there's not a singular</p>

solution to how people work best, which is why we believe flexibility should be at the forefront of our evolving hybrid workplace.”

Employees have 30 days from Feb. 28 to work out those agreements with their managers.

Expedia will also adopt a flexible approach, said spokesperson Dave McNamee. Most of the company’s offices are currently open to vaccinated employees. The elegant waterfront campus, [which was completed in 2019](#) as the company moved from Bellevue, had only been open for a short time before workers were sent home to work remotely.

Starting April 4, employees will be expected to “spend at least 50% of their time in the office, working with their respective leaders on an appropriate schedule,” McNamee said. “We’re of course going to be flexible and as such have instructed leaders to adopt a team-led approach in deciding schedules.”

In the midst of the pandemic, Microsoft set up a “hybrid workplace dial” to guide its plans for bringing workers back to the office and reopening its facilities. The dial moves in both directions, the company said.

In stages 1 through 5, employees were encouraged to work remotely, and Microsoft set up precautions like social distancing of workspaces, face coverings, daily health attestations and attendance strategies.

In stage 6, the final stage that Microsoft is heading toward this month, “COVID-19 is no longer a significant burden on the local community,” Microsoft said in a March 2021 blog post outlining its strategy. At this stage, most pandemic-specific worksite requirements and prevention measures are removed.

Microsoft made the decision to reopen based on high vaccination rates, declining hospitalizations and deaths in the state, and established local testing solutions, Capossela said Monday.

As of Feb. 14, about 87% of all eligible King County residents had completed their vaccine series and 95% had received at least one dose, according to Public Health — Seattle & King County data.

“As we navigate this new phase of work, we’ll continue to take a data-driven approach to decision-making that follows the guidance of public health authorities,” Capossela said. “We’re maintaining a close watch on local health data in every area where Microsoft has a physical presence, and we’ll adjust our course if necessary.

“We’ve learned a lot about working remotely in the last two years, and we’re fortunate to have the tools to continue doing so if needed.”

Microsoft will also fully reopen its Bay Area sites on Feb. 28.

Microsoft’s announcement was welcome news for the small business community of Redmond, the site of the company’s sprawling headquarters of more than 100 buildings on 500 acres, according to Kristina Hudson, CEO of OneRedmond, a public-private economic development enterprise. Before the pandemic, about 47,000 people worked at the Redmond campus.

The disappearance of Microsoft workers from the campus imperiled businesses that relied on that daily influx, Hudson added.

“This is a great step toward resiliency and having that additional foot traffic in small businesses will be welcomed,” she said.

She asked that returning Microsoft workers and customers “give some grace and patience” when visiting small businesses that are now struggling to rebuild amid staffing shortages and increased costs.

	<p>“We are excited to welcome Microsoft employees back to their Redmond campus soon,” Mayor Angela Birney said. “As Redmond’s largest employer, Microsoft’s employees’ return to work creates a positive impact for our entire community, especially our small businesses, and it demonstrates continued progress in moving forward together.”</p> <p>Business owners in downtown Bellevue, like their contemporaries in many city centers in the region, have also eagerly awaited the return of the office workers who once crowded downtown streets and helped support merchants.</p> <p>“As one of our top employers, their plans and decisions to come back to the office ... it’s a big deal for downtown Bellevue,” said Patrick Bannon, president of the Bellevue Downtown Association.</p> <p>Expedia’s news also got a positive reaction among policymakers and business leaders in Seattle. Although the company’s returning workers will have a smaller effect in Seattle than Microsoft’s will on the Eastside, the announcement was seen as a win for a downtown area that has sometimes struggled to maintain momentum for recovery.</p> <p>“I’m hoping this is going to be the beginning of a spring with more back-to-work announcements,” said Seattle City Councilmember Andrew Lewis, whose district takes in Expedia’s Interbay campus.</p> <p>Lewis took a tour of the new campus in early 2020, not long after it opened, “and then literally, two or three weeks later, they had to walk away,” Lewis said. “So it is good to see them coming back to be able to enjoy that campus with all the work they put into making it what it is.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 King Co. to close rent assistance program
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/real-estate/king-county-will-close-rent-assistance-program-to-new-applications-as-money-runs-out/
GIST	<p>With thousands of renters still awaiting help and federal funds running out, King County will soon stop accepting new applications for pandemic rent assistance.</p> <p>Tenants will no longer be able to apply for county help after Feb. 28 because the county has already received more applications than it can fund with the money available, the Department of Community and Human Services announced Monday.</p> <p>After applications close and the money is spent, the county expects about 7,000 to 8,000 tenants will be left without assistance.</p> <p>When funding runs out, “I expect to be busy,” said Edmund Witter, senior managing attorney for the Housing Justice Project, which represents tenants facing eviction.</p> <p>King County, like other local governments across the country, tapped into the flood of federal stimulus dollars to distribute an unprecedented level of rental help to landlords whose tenants fell behind on rent. While slow to distribute its funds last year, the county now says it has paid \$244 million in rent assistance since 2020.</p> <p>The program had backing from both tenants and landlords, who said they were struggling to cover their costs as renters fell behind.</p> <p>“Everyone needs to recognize how important rent assistance is, particularly when there’s such a shortage of homes right now to support people experiencing financial instability,” said Brett Waller, director of government affairs for the Washington Multi-Family Housing Association, which represents landlords.</p>

Even so, county officials have warned for months that the money they had would fall short of the need. The county has held off on processing nearly 11,000 applications because it was unsure it would have the funds.

In 2020, the county provided \$37.6 million to about 9,000 households through a lottery program. More than 25,000 landlords and tenants had applied for help.

Since the second iteration of the program began last summer, nearly 46,000 households have applied. So far, about 17,400 households have received assistance during the second round of the program. Three-fourths of those tenants are Black, Indigenous or people of color, according to county data. The county is paying an average of \$11,300 to landlords on behalf of each household.

The state recently announced \$66.5 million in additional funding for King County. That will help serve some, but not all, of those still waiting. The closure of applications this month amounts to an acknowledgement from King County that more federal or state funding is unlikely to arrive.

If the federal or state government steps in with new money, officials could reopen the system.

“We’re going to keep asking no matter how slim the chance is,” said Leo Flor, director of the Department of Community and Human Services.

Long-term challenge

Despite vast levels of funding, pandemic-era aid was not enough to address underlying problems in the housing market that long predated the coronavirus.

New state laws guarantee tenants who are facing eviction legal representation and require landlords to offer payment plans for debt accrued during the pandemic. But problems such as the lack of affordable housing remain.

“There are still a lot of people in our community who do not make enough to be able to afford the price of rent in our community,” Flor said.

About [4,500](#) evictions were filed in King County in 2019, before the pandemic, the vast majority for nonpayment of rent.

“We’ve got a situation in our community that pre-existed COVID in which it was normal for thousands of people to be evicted each year, and we haven’t really changed any of the underlying drivers of that system,” Flor said.

Witter, with the Housing Justice Project, argues the county should fund ongoing rent assistance, untethered from COVID-19.

The Housing Justice Project has about \$13 million in county rent assistance funds, but those funds are available only once a tenant is facing eviction in court.

“My concern is the long-term plan,” Witter said. “We need to keep people housed or otherwise they’re going to become homeless.”

Across the Seattle area, including Bellevue, Tacoma and Everett, an estimated 124,400 households — or 13% of renters — are behind on rent, according to an early January census survey. The effects are disproportionate. Renters of color are more likely to report being behind on rent than white tenants.

Without rent assistance, landlords whose tenants fall behind struggle to cover their costs, said Waller, from the Multi-Family Housing Association. “When you have tenants unable to pay their rent for whatever reason, it ultimately affects the ability to adequately operate that property.”

	<p>The winding down of rent assistance comes as most eviction moratoriums have been lifted across the state. Seattle’s eviction moratorium, which does not allow residential or small business evictions except in cases of threat to health and safety, will expire at the end of this month, but Seattle tenants will have a defense in court against rent-related evictions for six months after the city moratorium expires.</p> <p>Burien’s moratorium, which prohibits only those evictions based on nonpayment of rent, will last through the end of Gov. Jay Inslee’s COVID-19 emergency proclamation.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Russia signals openness diplomatic talks
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-russia-london-europe-moscow-b158645ccf222e05aede08e26b9f62c1
GIST	<p>MOSCOW (AP) — The Kremlin and the West held out the possibility of a diplomatic path out of the Ukraine crisis, even as Russia appeared to continue preparations for a potential invasion, including moving troops and military hardware closer to its neighbor.</p> <p>At a made-for-television meeting with President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov signaled Monday that Russia was ready to keep talking about the security grievances that have led to the crisis.</p> <p>The comments seemed designed to send a message to the world about Putin’s own position and offered some hope that war could be averted, even as Washington, London and other allies kept up their warnings that troops could move on Ukraine as soon as Wednesday.</p> <p>The fears stem from the fact that Russia has massed more than 130,000 Russian troops on Ukraine’s borders to the north, south and east. It has also launched massive military drills in Belarus, an ally that also borders Ukraine.</p> <p>Russia denies it has any plans to invade Ukraine, and Lavrov argued that Moscow should hold more talks, despite the West’s refusal to consider Russia’s main demands.</p> <p>The talks “can’t go on indefinitely, but I would suggest to continue and expand them at this stage,” Lavrov said, noting that Washington has offered to discuss limits for missile deployments in Europe, restrictions on military drills and other confidence-building measures.</p> <p>Moscow wants guarantees that NATO will not allow Ukraine and other former Soviet countries to join as members. It also wants the alliance to halt weapons deployments to Ukraine and roll back its forces from Eastern Europe.</p> <p>Lavrov said possibilities for talks “are far from being exhausted.”</p> <p>Putin noted that the West could try to draw Russia into “endless talks” and questioned whether there is still a chance to reach agreement. Lavrov replied that his ministry would not allow the U.S. and its allies to stonewall Russia’s main requests.</p> <p>The U.S. reacted coolly.</p> <p>“The path for diplomacy remains available if Russia chooses to engage constructively,” White House principal deputy press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said. “However, we are clear-eyed about the prospects of that, given the steps Russia is taking on the ground in plain sight.”</p> <p>U.S. officials said the Russian military continued apparent attack preparations along Ukraine’s borders. A U.S. defense official said small numbers of Russian ground units have been moving out of larger assembly areas for several days, taking up positions closer to the Ukrainian border at what would be departure points if Putin launched an invasion.</p>

The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss information not publicly released. CBS News was first to report on the movement of the units.

Maxar Technologies, a commercial satellite imagery company that has been monitoring the Russian buildup, reported increased Russian military activity in Belarus, Crimea and western Russia, including the arrival of helicopters, ground-attack aircraft and fighter-bomber jets at forward locations. The photos taken over a 48-hour period also show ground forces leaving their garrisons and combat units moving into convoy formation.

Still, Ukrainian security and defense council chief Oleksiy Danilov downplayed the threat of invasion but warned of the risk of “internal destabilization” by unspecified forces.

“Today we do not see that a large-scale offensive by the Russian Federation can take place either on (Feb.) 16th or the 17th,” he told reporters. “We are aware of the risks that exist in the territory of our country. But the situation is absolutely under control.”

As if to show defiance, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Wednesday would be a “day of national unity,” calling on the country to display the blue-and-yellow flag and sing the national anthem in the face of “hybrid threats.”

“It is not the first threat the strong Ukrainian people have faced,” Zelenskyy said Monday evening in a video address to the nation. “We’re calm. We’re strong. We’re together.”

The country is preparing nonetheless. Kyiv residents received letters from the mayor urging them “to defend your city,” and signs appeared in apartment buildings indicating the nearest bomb shelter. The capital has about 4,500 such sites, including underground parking garages, subway stations and basements, the mayor said.

Dr. Tamara Ugrich said she stocked up on grains and canned food and prepared an emergency suitcase.

“I don’t believe in war, but on TV the tension is growing every day, and it’s getting harder and harder to keep calm,” she said. “The more we are told not to panic, the more nervous people become.”

In a last-ditch diplomatic effort German Chancellor Olaf Scholz planned to travel to Moscow on Tuesday for talks with Putin.

One possible off-ramp emerged this week. Ukraine’s ambassador to the U.K., Vadym Prystaiko, pointed at a possibility of Ukraine shelving its NATO bid — an objective that is written into its constitution — if it would avert war with Russia.

Prystaiko later appeared to back away from the idea, but the fact that it was raised at all suggests it is being discussed behind closed doors.

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HEADLINE	02/15 World on edge: what is Putin’s next move?
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/15/politics/russia-ukraine-politics-us-putin-diplomacy/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)The world is suspended in an extraordinary moment of geopolitical limbo, on edge for a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine amid conflicting signals in Moscow, confusion in Kyiv and dire warnings from Washington.</p> <p>Already extreme tensions rose even further as one of the most dangerous moments in Europe since World War II stretches nerves and leaves everyone -- apart perhaps from President Vladimir Putin -- wondering what is next.</p>

On Monday, there were signs of a possible last-minute openness to a diplomatic off-ramp in the Kremlin, but the spectacle of an estimated [130,000 troops on high alert outside Ukraine's borders](#) suggested a feint as much as a blink by Putin. Russia announced Tuesday that [some of its troops](#) would return to base after completing recent drills, but stressed that other major military exercises would continue.

In the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, confusion reigned -- not for the first time -- as [President Volodymyr Zelensky](#), a young leader facing the highest stakes, sarcastically dismissed Western projections of a possible Russian invasion on February 16. And in contrast with the foreboding signs elsewhere, couples flocked to Kyiv's bars and restaurants to celebrate Valentine's Day despite the looming threat of war.

In Washington, the mood music grew even darker. While believing that Putin hasn't finally made up his mind, multiple officials suggested Russia could move against Ukraine at any moment. And one source familiar with the matter predicted an invasion was more likely this week than not -- and said Moscow could maintain its current force posture for quite some time even if it doesn't cross the border.

There is a palpable sense that Russia and the West have reached a historic fork in the road. Down one route lies a return to the confrontation and tensions that prevailed for decades during the Cold War. Down the other might lie a diplomatic fudge that no key player seems able to frame given stark Russian demands.

A crisis America doesn't need

At a moment when many Americans are facing [rising prices for basic goods and gasoline](#) and are exhausted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine crisis seems distant and esoteric. But a Russian invasion could force up energy prices even more and rock stock markets, on which many rely for their retirements.

The crisis is largely a creation of Putin and his personal and disputed version of history that holds that Ukraine, which was [part of the Soviet Union until its breakup in 1991](#), should be part of greater Russia. It also stems from his deep resentment about how the Cold War ended and the admission of former Warsaw Pact nations, which had been aligned with Soviets, into NATO. In effect, Putin is holding Ukraine hostage with a demand for the withdrawal of those NATO forces from Eastern Europe -- a concession that would contradict 70 years of the West's doctrine that independent nations choose their own destinies.

If America's long support for democracy and free-market capitalism is to mean anything in a new era when its power and example are being challenged by autocracies like China, it has no alternative but to stand up for Ukraine.

Waiting on Putin

In essence, the world was left wondering and worrying Monday what one man -- Putin -- will do next. There are plenty of reasons why the Russian leader may step back at the brink. An invasion might swiftly overcome Ukraine's forces.

But the country is bigger than Germany or France and an insurgency -- perhaps supported by US weapons and funds -- could be a disaster for Russia. The sight of Russian troops being killed could further hurt Putin's declining popularity. But a burst of nationalism triggered by war abroad could boost his standing in a nation he rules with an iron fist.

And Putin is not shy about wielding military might for political advantage, for instance against separatists in the [Russian republic of Chechnya](#) and in his annexation of [Crimea -- in Ukraine -- in 2014](#).

But some analysts believe that he has already achieved many of his objectives -- effectively setting back any aspirations Ukraine may have of joining NATO in the future. He has inserted Russia, disdained by many leaders as a declining power, back into the spotlight and is welcoming a parade of foreign leaders and ministers to Moscow. On Tuesday, Germany's new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, will visit the vastly more experienced Putin in a test of his resolve stiffened by a White House visit last week.

The continuing diplomatic dance is a reason for hope that war could be avoided. But the fact that Putin has built such a massive force around Ukraine, in Russia, Belarus and in the Black Sea means that a decision

not to invade may be seen as a loss of face. The former KGB officer, who was in East Germany when the Berlin Wall fell, also feels the humiliation of the Soviet collapse deeply. He seems to believe that NATO, a defensive alliance, is an offensive threat to Russia, one that may require him to build a buffer around Russian territory by invading Ukraine -- which has borders with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania - all NATO members once behind the Iron Curtain.

The US will not send troops to Ukraine, because it's not a NATO member. But if Putin invades, troops from the US and Russia, the world's two top nuclear powers, could soon be in close proximity in Europe, with the alarming possibility of miscalculations.

Hope for diplomacy?

A day that saw glimmers of hope and ended with even more chilling warnings from the United States started in Moscow, where Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had what appeared to be a scripted on-camera event.

"I must say that there is always a chance," Lavrov said, referring to the prospects for diplomacy. Putin had earlier asked Lavrov whether efforts to talk Russia down were "just an attempt to drag us into an endless negotiation process that has no logical resolution." His comment was ironic since many in the West believe this is exactly Putin's game and that talks are just a bluff until the moment is right to move on Ukraine. Still, the appearance could indicate Putin is finally seeking a diplomatic off-ramp, though NATO would never accept his demands to leave Eastern Europe.

"Signals today suggest that they may be looking at some last-minute diplomatic maneuvers," Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut told CNN's Becky Anderson in an interview. "I do think as Putin gets closer to pulling the trigger here, he is better understanding the costs." Washington and its allies have threatened the most crippling sanctions ever on Russia's economy if Putin invades.

Michael Bociurkiw, the former spokesman for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, also expressed tempered hope.

"It's hard to know what to believe coming out of Mr. Lavrov's mouth," Bociurkiw said on "CNN Newsroom" but added that the airing of his encounter with Putin on Russian state TV was significant.

"To me, it indicated that they're willing to hold off on a possible military solution to their Ukraine issue. There are more foreign ministers coming later in the week. ... So that was their way of saying, 'We're open to more dialogue.' "

Dark warnings from Washington

Still, if US sources are to be believed, the photo op in Moscow was all for show.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Putin "continues to add to" his "menu of options" with new land, sea and air forces. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the [US had closed its Kyiv embassy](#) "due to the dramatic acceleration in the buildup of Russian forces." A source familiar with the matter told CNN's Natasha Bertrand that a Russian attack on Ukraine is more likely this week than not, and if it doesn't happen on that timetable it doesn't mean that the threat has passed.

Senators emerging from a briefing with national security adviser Jake Sullivan were equally pessimistic. "This is a very dangerous situation," Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, the top Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, told reporters. The committee's chair, Democratic Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, added: "The forces the Russians have massed, they could launch at any point. Nothing I heard today dissuaded me from that."

Grim US rhetoric continued a trend of remarkably frank US and Western commentary on the situation based on declassified information, apparently designed both to increase pressure on Putin and to smoke out any attempt by Moscow to fake an incident as a ruse to justify an invasion.

	But all along, there has been a gap between Washington and Kyiv on the possibility of an invasion. Zelensky sent shock waves all the way to the US on Monday when he named February 16 a day of national unity, while referencing foreign fears of an invasion. But when CNN asked Mykhailo Podoliak, a presidential adviser, how to take his comments, he replied: "Of course, with irony." It seems an odd time for sarcasm. But Zelensky is a former comic actor and might feel justified in dark humor given the circumstances.
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HEADLINE	02/15 Philippines: Hamas plot to incite violence
SOURCE	https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/asia-and-australia/filipino-police-uncover-hamas-plot-to-recruit-locals-attack-israeli-targets-1.10612541
GIST	<p>The Philippine police announced on Tuesday that they had revealed a Hamas plot to incite violence targeting Israelis in the Philippines, the island nation's state media said.</p> <p>According to the Philippine News Agency, the Philippine National Police said that the Hamas plan involved attempts to recruit Filipino citizens to carry out terror attacks against Jews and Israeli citizens, thereby establishing a foothold in the country and waging a proxy war against Israel.</p> <p>Police officials said they were tipped off by a local contact that a man called "Bashir" was trying to gain ground in the Philippines by promising financial support to local militant groups with ties to international terrorist organizations.</p> <p>Police intelligence chief Brig. Gen. Neil Alinsangan said that with the help of local and foreign intelligence counterparts, they identified "Bashir" as Fares al-Shikli, who is reportedly the head of Hamas' foreign liaison unit within Hamas. He added that Shikli is wanted by Interpol on terrorism charges.</p> <p>Shikli started grooming the source, the report said, in 2016, where he trained the Filipino national in building bombs in Malaysia. He traveled to Malaysia several times over the following two years to meet with the Hamas official; the two discussed the possibility of attacking Israelis in the Philippines in exchange for financial support.</p> <p>Shikli told the source in late 2017 that he wishes to recruit Filipino citizens with links to militant groups to kill Jews, rally at embassies and disseminate video propaganda in the Philippines, who would be supported by Hamas.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 How long to get tax refund in 2022?
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tax-refund-when-get-irs-returns-2022-02-14/
GIST	<p>Three in four Americans receive an annual tax refund from the IRS, which often is a family's biggest check of the year. But with this tax season now open, taxpayers could see a repeat of last year's snarls in processing, when about 30 million taxpayers had their returns — and refunds — held up by the IRS.</p> <p>Treasury Department officials warned last month that this year's tax season will be a challenge with the IRS starting to process returns on January 24. That's largely due to the IRS' sizable backlog of returns from 2021. As of December 31, the agency had 6 million unprocessed individual returns — a significant reduction from a backlog of 30 million in May, but far higher than the 1 million unprocessed returns that is more typical around the start of tax season.</p> <p>That may make taxpayers nervous about delays in 2022, but most Americans should get their refunds within 21 days of filing, according to the IRS. And some taxpayers are already reporting receiving their refunds, according to posts on social media.</p> <p>But there are some caveats about the 21-day window to get a refund. Claiming the Earned Income Tax Credit or the Child Tax Credit will slow down your tax return due to regulations designed to deter fraud,</p>

but that means people who claim those credits and filed their returns on January 24 or close to that date may not receive their refund until early March, the IRS said.

And other issues can slow down your refund, such as errors like math problems or incorrectly stating how much you received from the advanced Child Tax Credit payments. In those cases, your tax return could get flagged, leading to delays of weeks or even months.

The IRS on Monday said tax returns with errors involving the third stimulus check, which are missing information or which have suspected fraud or theft could take up to 90 to 120 days to resolve.

Some taxpayers may also inadvertently claim the wrong amount on their tax returns this year — and through no fault of their own. The IRS on Monday said that some of its Child Tax Credit letters — letter 6419 — [included incorrect information](#) about the amount some taxpayers received. The IRS is asking taxpayers to refer to the letter when filling out their tax return.

But if that happens, that taxpayer's return may not match what the IRS has on file, leading to the return getting flagged — and delays in getting their return processed and their refund sent to them, said Larry Gray, a CPA and government relations liaison for the National Association of Tax Professionals.

"People may not realize the letter could be wrong, and what is the IRS doing to send out a follow-up communication to stop creating a bigger backlog in the coming season?" he said on a conference call to discuss tax professionals' concerns about the current tax season.

If all goes well, though, taxpayers who e-file can receive their refunds via direct deposit as quickly as one week after filing based on previous years' processing time, [according](#) to trade publication CPA Advisor. It's important to note that processing time typically slows down as the tax season gets underway and the IRS handles more returns, it noted.

Ongoing backlog

In the meantime, tax experts say there are some steps taxpayers can take to help ensure a quick tax refund, which is even more important this year given that the IRS is starting with a backlog. Last month, National Taxpayer Advocate Erin M. Collins issued a [report](#) to Congress that warned she is "deeply concerned about the upcoming filing season" given the backlog, among other issues.

"The first thing you know if you are going to cook a meal, you have to have the kitchen cleaned up from the last meal," said Mark W. Everson, vice chairman at Alliantgroup and former Commissioner of the IRS. "It just snowballs into a terrible situation."

Delays in processing tax returns count as one of the agency's most pressing problems, Collins said in her report, which [described an agency in crisis](#).

"Weeks and weeks" of IRS delays

Although the IRS says most refunds will be sent within 21 days, experts warn that delays are likely, noting that the agency is still working through 2020 tax returns.

During the 2020 budget year, the IRS processed more than 240 million tax returns and issued roughly \$736 billion in refunds, including \$268 billion in federal stimulus payments, according to the latest IRS data. Over that period roughly 60 million people called or visited an IRS office.

Donald Williamson, an accounting and taxation professor at American University in Washington, said he expects "weeks and weeks" of IRS delays in 2022. "My advice in 2022 is file early, get started tomorrow and try to put your taxes together with a qualified professional."

Compounding the challenge, tax preparers told CBS MoneyWatch that it remains hard to reach IRS personnel on the phone. The IRS answered only about 1 in 9 taxpayer calls during fiscal year 2021, Collins reported. "Many taxpayers are not getting answers to their questions and are frustrated," she noted.

"Back in the old days, you'd wait 5-10 minutes and get an IRS agent on the phone," said Christian Cyr, a CPA and president and chief investment officer at Cyr Financial. But now, he said, his CPAs wait hours to speak with an IRS employee, with no guarantee of ever reaching one.

Ensuring smooth tax filing comes with a lot on the line, given that the average refund last year was about \$2,800. Below are tips from tax experts and the IRS on how to get a tax refund within 21 days of filing.

1. File electronically

This is a step the IRS is strongly urging this year. Although some people may simply like filing paper returns — and others may [have no choice](#) — the agency says that taxpayers who file electronically are more likely to have their returns processed quickly.

That's because the IRS relies on computers to electronically process filed returns, while paper returns must be handled by human employees. In the [early days of the pandemic](#), the IRS shut its offices and employees stopped opening mail — delaying processing of paper returns.

Even aside from employee strains due to the pandemic, the IRS' staffing hasn't kept up with population growth. The agency's workforce is now the same size it was in 1970, despite the population growing by 60%. That means fewer workers to handle a greater volume of returns.

About 10 million people filed paper returns last year, or about 7% of the 148 million returns filed in 2021, according to data from the Taxpayer Advocate Service. Tax experts urge people to join the roughly 138 million taxpayers who are already using e-filing.

"Paper is the IRS's Kryptonite, and the agency is still buried in it," National Taxpayer Advocate Collins said on Wednesday.

2. Get a refund via direct deposit

The IRS also recommends that taxpayers arrange to get their refunds by direct deposit. The agency says the fastest way to get your money is to use the combination of e-filing with direct deposit, which sends the money into your bank account.

About 95 million people received refunds last year, with about 87 million of them opting for direct deposit. Most taxpayers who file electronically and choose direct deposit will get their refund within 21 days, assuming there are no problems with the return, according to the IRS.

3. Don't guesstimate

The IRS checks its data against the figures taxpayers detail on their returns. If there's a discrepancy — say your W2 shows that you earned \$60,000, but you write on the return that you earned \$58,000 — the return is flagged for manual review by an employee.

Once that happens, it's likely your tax return will face a delay of weeks or even months. That's why tax experts advise people to check forms carefully to ensure they're reporting data accurately. Filling out your tax return shouldn't rely on "word of mouth or the honor system," Cyr said. "I guarantee that will cause delays."

4. Save IRS letters about stimulus, CTC

Along those lines, the IRS is sending letters this month to taxpayers who received the third federal stimulus check in 2021, as well as the advanced [Child Tax Credit payments](#).

These letters will inform each taxpayer what they received through these programs in 2021 — they are important documents to hold onto because you'll want to refer to those amounts when filling out your tax return.

A major reason tax returns were delayed in 2021 was because taxpayers made mistakes in reporting their 2020 stimulus payment amounts on their returns, resulting in their tax filings getting flagged for manual review.

"Don't have any problems that are caused from your own negligence," Everson advised.

However, due to the incorrect CTC letters that were sent to some taxpayers, the IRS is advising taxpayers to double-check how much they received by logging into their accounts at IRS.gov.

The IRS will send two letters:

- Letter 6419 — informing taxpayers of their advance CTC payments. The agency began sending these letters in December and will continue to do so in January.
- Letter 6475 — about the third stimulus check. That letter will be sent in late January.

Keep both of these letters and refer to them when you complete your tax return, tax experts said.

You may face a delay if you claim these tax credits

There are a couple of issues that could cause delays, even if you do everything correctly.

The IRS notes that it can't issue a refund that involves the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) or the Child Tax Credit before mid-February. "The law provides this additional time to help the IRS stop fraudulent refunds from being issued," the agency said this week.

That means if you file as soon as possible on January 24, you still might not receive a refund within the 21-day time frame if your tax return involves either of those tax credits. In fact, the IRS is informing those who claim these credits that they will most likely receive their refunds in early March, assuming they filed their returns on January 24 or close to that date.

The reason relates to a [2015 law](#) that slows refunds for people who claim these credits, which was designed as a measure to combat fraudsters who rely on identity theft to grab taxpayer's refunds.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Brussels: trucker protest plans fizzle
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/police-filter-brussels-traffic-dilute-trucker-protests-82873450
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- Plans for a major trucker virus protest near the European Union headquarters in Brussels fizzled Monday, with police filtering traffic during the morning rush hour to leave only a few scattered demonstrators on foot instead.</p> <p>Police narrowed some highways and imposed go-slow traffic early Monday in and around the Belgian capital to keep control of what it feared could turn into a choking protest like those by horn-honking truckers in Canada. Early indications didn't show a groundswell of support for the protest but police took extensive precautions.</p> <p>"We don't actually think that Brussels has been paralyzed. Anyone who wanted to enter Brussels with good intentions was able to do so — with some delay, of course," said federal police spokeswoman An Berger.</p> <p>Instead a few hundred people protesting virus restrictions gathered in a square in the Belgian capital.</p> <p>Many trucks had been expected from France, where Paris police fired tear gas Saturday against a handful of demonstrators on the Champs-Elysees Avenue who defied a police order by taking part in a vehicle protest. But a threatened blockade of Paris failed to materialize over the weekend, despite days of online organizing efforts.</p>

	In the Netherlands, dozens of trucks and other vehicles arrived Saturday in The Hague for a similar virus-related protest, blocking an entrance to the historic Dutch parliamentary complex.
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HEADLINE	02/14 Hong Kong plans to vaccinate 3yr-olds
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/hong-kong-vaccinate-year-olds-amid-covid-19-82874453
GIST	<p>HONG KONG -- Hong Kong plans to offer COVID-19 vaccines to children as young as 3 as infections rage through the semi-autonomous Chinese city.</p> <p>The announcement late Sunday came ahead of another surge in cases. The city reported a record 2,071 new cases on Monday, with that number expected to double the next day with more than 4,500 preliminary positives identified.</p> <p>Hong Kong schools extended a suspension of in-class teaching for two weeks to March 6,</p> <p>The wave blamed on the omicron variant has already prompted new restrictions limiting in-person gatherings to no more than two households. Hong Kong residents have been rushing to grocery stores to stock up on vegetables and to hair salons to get haircuts.</p> <p>Authorities have imposed lockdowns on residential buildings wherever clusters of infections are identified, and have already banned public dining after 6 p.m. Only vaccinated people will be permitted in shopping malls and supermarkets, while places of worship, hair salons and other businesses have been ordered to close.</p> <p>Immunizations using Chinese maker Sinovac's vaccine for children aged 3 and above will start being administered on Tuesday. Previously, the age limit was 5 years old. Hong Kong has fully vaccinated 73% of its eligible population, not including children.</p> <p>With a population of about 7.5 million, Hong Kong currently has more than 7,000 people being treated for COVID-19 or awaiting admission to hospitals.</p> <p>Hong Kong has adopted mainland China's "zero tolerance" approach to dealing with the pandemic that requires quarantines, mask mandates, case tracing and lockdowns of buildings, neighborhoods and entire cities, even when only a few cases are detected.</p> <p>Beijing officials and Chinese state media say adopting a "living with the virus" policy as some countries have done would overwhelm Hong Kong's medical system.</p> <p>The city has as recorded more than 25,000 COVID-19 cases and about 220 deaths from the virus.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 SKorea virus deaths rise; new cases record
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/korean-covid-deaths-rise-hope-rests-high-booster-82893363
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- South Korea reported its highest number of COVID-19 deaths in a month Tuesday as U.S. health authorities advised Americans to avoid traveling to the country grappling with a fast-developing omicron surge.</p> <p>The 61 deaths reported by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency on Tuesday was the highest daily tally since the 74 reported on Jan. 19, when the country was emerging from an outbreak driven by the delta variant.</p> <p>While omicron so far seems less likely to cause serious illness or death, the greater scale of the outbreak is fueling concerns that hospitalizations and fatalities could spike in coming weeks.</p>

The 57,177 new cases reported by the KDCA was another one-day record and more than a 12-fold increase from the levels seen in mid-January, when omicron became the dominant strain.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated its travel notice for South Korea to level 4, the highest risk, advising Americans to avoid travel to the country or to make sure they are fully vaccinated if traveling is necessary.

Park Hyang, a senior South Korean Health Ministry official, said the country's hospital resources remain stable, with less than 27% of intensive care units designated for COVID-19 currently being occupied.

Officials have expressed cautious hope the country's high vaccination rate – with nearly 58% of a population of more than 51 million having received booster shots – would prevent hospital systems from buckling. They plan to start offering fourth vaccination shots to people at nursing homes and other long-term care settings later this month.

“While unvaccinated people account for only 6% of the population 12 years or older, these people have accounted for 62% of serious cases and 66.5% of the deaths over the past eight weeks,” Park said during a briefing.

South Korea has reshaped its COVID-19 response due to the unprecedented surge. It has significantly eased quarantine restrictions so essential services won't be disrupted by having huge numbers of people in quarantine. More than 245,000 infected people were being treated at home as of Tuesday, weeks after at-home treatment was made the standard for mild or moderate cases.

Testing practices are also now centered around rapid antigen tests, with the more accurate laboratory tests reserved mostly for high-risk groups. But there are concerns that infected people may falsely test negative and continue to stay out in public, which could worsen the spread of the virus.

“Compared to PCR (lab) tests, rapid antigen testing has limitations in accuracy. Our new testing policy is based on the thinking that such limitations must be tolerated as a tradeoff for detecting serious cases earlier amid a major viral spread like this one,” Health Ministry official Son Youngrae said.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Turkey president in UAE; relations thaw
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/turkish-president-uae-relations-thaw-icy-decade-82877396
GIST	<p>ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates -- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan traveled Monday to the United Arab Emirates, a trip signaling a further thaw in relations long strained over the two nations' approaches to Islamists in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring.</p> <p>Erdogan arrived in Abu Dhabi, the Emirati capital, following a November visit to Turkey by the country's de facto leader, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.</p> <p>Sheikh Mohammed, also Abu Dhabi's crown prince, greeted Erdogan at the airport and oversaw an honor-guard welcome for the Turkish president at the Al-Watan Palace. A thundering gun salute heralded his welcome as every major Emirati minister stood alongside. Later, even electronic billboards in Dubai praised the UAE and Turkey's “strategic” relationship.</p> <p>Neither Sheikh Mohammed nor Erdogan addressed journalists. The visit marked Erdogan's first visit to the UAE since 2013.</p> <p>Before taking off from Turkey, Erdogan said he hopes his visit advances the “big potential” of trade between the countries. The UAE is an important economic market for Turkey and home to many Turkish citizens. He also said Sheikh Mohammed's earlier visit represented a “new phase” of relations between the nations.</p>

Anwar Gargash, a senior Emirati diplomat, similarly tweeted that Erdogan's visit “opens a new positive page in the bilateral relations between the two countries.”

It "is in line with the UAE's direction towards strengthening bridges of communication and cooperation aimed at stability and prosperity in the region," he wrote.

For the two nations, the visit caps a monthslong rapprochement born out of the coronavirus pandemic and geopolitical necessity.

Relations strained largely over Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in the region, which the UAE sees as a top national security threat that could upend its hereditary rule in the federation of seven sheikhdoms. Ankara suspects the UAE backed a network led by a U.S.-based Turkish Muslim cleric who Turkey accuses of orchestrating a failed coup targeting Erdogan in 2016.

The two nations also backed opposing sides in Libya, while Dubai became home to a Turkish gangster whose online videos last year outlined alleged corruption in Erdogan's Justice and Development Party. He's since stopped posting them.

Abu Dhabi has retooled a more-adversarial approach in dealing with regional rivals after largely withdrawing its forces from the war in Yemen. After ending its part in a four-nation boycott of Turkish-allied Qatar, the Emirates has sought to mend ties with Ankara amid attacks across the region sparked by the collapse of Iran's nuclear deal with world powers.

In Turkey, the 67-year-old Erdogan faces an economic crisis and a depreciating lira currency, something economists have blamed on his interest rate cuts. Lower interest rates had spurred economic growth across Turkey. Erdogan also has grown more authoritarian in his nearly two-decade hold on power in Turkey, a country of some 84 million people.

The UAE, home also to Dubai, agreed in January to a currency swap deal equivalent to \$4.74 billion to boost Turkey's depleted foreign exchange reserves. During Sheikh Mohammed's breakthrough visit to Turkey last fall, Emirati officials said the UAE would set aside \$10 billion for investment in Turkey.

Erdogan is scheduled to visit Dubai's Expo 2020 on Tuesday before wrapping up his trip.

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HEADLINE	02/14 UK firm after Mauritius plants flag
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/uk-firm-chagos-islands-claim-mauritius-plants-flag-82881629
GIST	<p>LONDON -- The British government reaffirmed its sovereignty over a remote Indian Ocean archipelago on Monday after Mauritius underlined its own territorial claim by planting a flag on the islands.</p> <p>Officials planted the red, blue, yellow and green flag of Mauritius on the Peros Banhos atoll in the Chagos Islands, whose residents were expelled by Britain half a century ago to make way for a U.S. military base.</p> <p>Several Chagos islanders accompanied Mauritian officials on a voyage that also involved a scientific survey of a nearby coral reef. It was the first time they had set foot there since Britain evicted about 2,000 residents in the 1960s and 70s so the U.S. military could build an air base on Diego Garcia, one of the islands.</p> <p>The Guardian reported that a message from Mauritius Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth was played at the flag-raising, hailing the “historic visit.”</p> <p>“The message I wish to give out to the world, as the state with sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago, is that we will ensure a wise stewardship of its territory — over its maritime security, conservation of the marine environment and human rights, notably the return of those of Chagossian origin,” he was quoted as saying.</p>

	<p>Britain's Foreign Office said Monday that the U.K. "has no doubt as to our sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory, which we have held continuously since 1814."</p> <p>"Mauritius has never held sovereignty over the territory and the U.K. does not recognize its claim," it said in a statement.</p> <p>The displaced residents have fought for years in the courts for the right to return to their home islands, which the U.K. calls the British Indian Ocean Territory. In 2019 the International Court of Justice and the United Nations General Assembly both told Britain to give up control of the islands, which it held on to after Mauritius gained independence in 1968.</p> <p>The international court said in a non-binding opinion that Britain had unlawfully carved up Mauritius, an archipelago nation whose main island is some 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) off the southeast coast of Africa.</p> <p>Successive British governments have expressed regret about the way the islanders were removed but have not allowed them to return or heeded the non-binding international opinions.</p> <p>In 2020 Britain said it would "cede sovereignty of the territory to Mauritius when it is no longer required for defense purposes."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Diplomacy steps up Ukraine, Russia crisis
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ukraine-russia-crisis-diplomacy-steps-82874725
GIST	<p>BERLIN -- Diplomatic efforts to head off what U.S. officials have warned could be an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine entered a new round on Monday. Russia's top diplomat advised President Vladimir Putin to continue talks and Germany's chancellor met the Ukrainian president.</p> <p>Nonetheless the U.S. announced it is closing its embassy in Ukraine and moving all remaining staffers there to a city near the Polish border.</p> <p>Earlier, Britain's prime minister said Europe is "on the edge of a precipice," citing an American warning that Russia could invade Ukraine in the next 48 hours.</p> <p>Here's a look at what is happening where and why:</p> <p>WHAT'S THE MESSAGE FROM RUSSIA?</p> <p>The Kremlin signaled Monday that it is ready to keep talking with the West about security grievances that led to the current crisis, offering hope that Russia might not invade Ukraine within days as Western officials increasingly fear.</p> <p>In an appearance orchestrated for TV cameras, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov argued that possibilities for talks haven't been exhausted. That seemed designed to send a message that Putin himself believes hopes for a diplomatic solution haven't yet faded.</p> <p>Lavrov said the talks "can't go on indefinitely, but I would suggest to continue and expand them at this stage." He noted that Washington has offered to discuss limits for missile deployments in Europe, restrictions on military drills and other confidence-building measures.</p> <p>Asked by Putin if it made sense to continue diplomatic efforts, Lavrov responded that possibilities for talks "are far from being exhausted" and he proposed to continue the negotiations. He said his ministry wouldn't allow the U.S. and its allies to stonewall Russia's main requests.</p>

U.S. officials responded they're looking for actions, not merely talk. "If Foreign Minister Lavrov's comments are followed up with concrete, tangible signs of de-escalation, we would certainly welcome that," State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters. "We have not seen that yet."

WHAT'S THE LATEST U.S. ACTION?

The United States said Monday it will close its embassy in Ukraine and move all remaining staffers there to a city near the Polish border as invasion fears intensify. It also repeated warnings to private American citizens in Ukraine to leave immediately.

The State Department announcement follows a decision it took over the weekend to order the departure of all non-essential diplomats from Kyiv. The embassy will now suspend operations and the property will be looked after by local Ukrainian security guards.

A small number of embassy staff from Kyiv will relocate to Lviv, where they will provide limited consular services to Americans and keep communications open with the Ukrainian government, the department said.

The State Department also told Americans in Belarus to leave the country immediately due to "unusual and concerning Russian military buildup along Belarus' border with Ukraine."

Secretary of State Antony Blinken also said the U.S. would offer a loan guarantee of up to \$1 billion to Ukraine to help bolster its economic stability "in the face of Russia's destabilizing behavior."

Meanwhile, the Pentagon announced that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will go to the NATO defense ministerial in Brussels this week, and will also visit Poland and Lithuania, neighbors to Ukraine. Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Austin will meet with the presidents, defense ministers and other key leaders in Poland and Lithuania, as well as U.S. forces in those countries. Kirby said Austin also is planning to have a trilateral meeting with the defense chiefs of the three Baltic nations, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan briefed Senate leadership Monday afternoon. Senators are considering a resolution in support of Ukraine's independence while stopping short of legislation to impose sanctions on Russia.

WHAT'S GOING ON IN UKRAINE?

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz brought a message of solidarity to Kyiv, telling Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity are not negotiable.

Scholz, whose visit came ahead of a meeting with Putin in Moscow on Tuesday, demanded "clear steps to de-escalate the current tensions" from Russia. He thanked the Ukrainian government for its "sober and restrained reaction to a very serious and threatening situation."

Scholz noted that NATO and the U.S. have made proposals to Moscow that Germany supports, "and we now expect a reaction, an answer to them from Russia." He urged Russia to accept offers of dialogue.

The German chancellor said in case of military escalation, "we are ready for very far-reaching and effective sanctions in consultation with our allies" and that "we know what to do" if Russia were to violate Ukraine's territorial integrity again.

Zelenskyy called the tensions around his country's future "an unprecedented challenge for Europe and the world."

"It is in Ukraine that the future of the European security architecture — of which our state is a part — is being decided today."

Separately, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres held talks Monday with the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine and again underlined that “there is no alternative to diplomacy” to resolve the dispute over Ukraine.

WHEN COULD RUSSIA MAKE ITS MOVE?

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson says Europe is “on the edge of a precipice,” citing an American warning that Russia could invade Ukraine in the next 48 hours.

“But there is still time for President Putin to step back,” Johnson said.

U.S. officials said the Russian military has continued its buildup and apparent attack preparations along Ukraine’s borders.

A U.S. defense official said that for several days small numbers of Russian ground combat units have been moving out of larger assembly areas to positions closer to the Ukrainian border, what would be departure points if Putin launched an invasion.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss information not publicly released. CBS News was first to report on the movement of units closer to the border.

Separately, the head of Sweden’s military forces said Russia has “all the needed capacity along the Ukrainian border for a military operation.”

“We do not exclude anything,” Gen. Micael Byden, whose country is not a NATO member. “Whether it happens today, on Wednesday or a week, we do not know.”

AND WHAT IF TALKS DON'T SUCCEED?

Poland is making preparations to accept Ukrainian refugees in the event of another Russian attack on its neighbor. But the Polish government hopes that worst-case scenario can be averted.

Similar preparations are being made across the region, particularly in nations that border Ukraine.

Poland, which has welcomed large numbers of Ukrainian economic migrants in recent years, particularly after Russia’s incursions into Ukraine in 2014, has been making plans for weeks to accept refugees if it comes to that, said Marcin Przydacz, a deputy foreign minister.

HOW IS UKRAINE'S PRESIDENT FARING?

Zelenskyy won a landslide victory in 2019. As a political novice making an unlikely bid for the job, he had vowed to reach out to Russia-backed rebels in the east who were fighting Ukrainian forces and make strides toward resolving the conflict.

But Zelenskyy is watching his once-enormous support dissolve as Ukraine faces fears of a Russian invasion that could not only take the rebel regions but possibly the rest of the country.

To make matters worse, the incumbent whom Zelenskyy defeated in 2019 has boldly returned to the country to face charges of treason and stir up opposition to him. Analysts suggest that Moscow is seeking to bolster support among pro-Russia politicians in Ukraine and that the buildup of Russian forces near Ukraine’s border is aimed partly at destabilizing the country’s politics.

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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/poland-prepares-accept-ukrainian-refugees-case-war-82875811
GIST	<p>WARSAW, Poland -- Poland, the largest European Union nation to border Ukraine, is making preparations to accept Ukrainian refugees in the event of another Russian attack on that country. But the Polish government hopes that worst-case scenario can be averted.</p> <p>Similar preparations are being made across the region, particularly in those nations which share borders with Ukraine.</p> <p>As other countries draw down their diplomatic missions in Ukraine, Poland says it is for now keeping its diplomatic operations in place in case they are needed to facilitate a large-scale exit of Ukrainians.</p> <p>Poland, which has welcomed large numbers of Ukrainian economic migrants in recent years, particularly after Russia's incursions into Ukraine in 2014, has been making plans for weeks to accept refugees if it comes to that, said Marcin Przydacz, a deputy foreign minister.</p> <p>While Poland has an image of being staunchly anti-refugee, that opposition is largely based on not wanting to take in large numbers of people of different religious and racial backgrounds.</p> <p>Ukrainians — who like Poles are a Slavic people with a similar language and customs — have filled gaps in the labor market and have been largely welcomed in Poland in recent years.</p> <p>Przydacz said in a radio interview on Monday that Poland hopes the situation in Ukraine won't escalate, but that the country was preparing for any possibility, including the possibility of large numbers of refugees.</p> <p>"In this worst-case scenario, we are not talking about hundreds or thousands, but much larger numbers," Przydacz said on Radio Plus.</p> <p>He added that the Interior Ministry has been preparing "internal scenarios, infrastructure and plans" for many weeks.</p> <p>The plans would include housing refugees in hostels, dormitories, sports facilities and other venues.</p> <p>Local officials, including town mayors, have been asked to draw up reports of what facilities they could make available, according to Krzysztof Kosiński, the mayor of Ciechanow, a Polish town near the border with Ukraine, and the secretary of the Association of Polish Cities.</p> <p>Ukraine, which is bordered by Belarus to the north and Russia to the east, also shares borders with the EU nations of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, as well as the non-EU state of Moldova.</p> <p>Hungary's nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orbán, warned Saturday that a Russian invasion of Ukraine could send hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees fleeing across the border into his country.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Slovakia is also preparing for a wave of refugees in the case of a conflict. The government has prepared a plan what to do in such a scenario, but it is classified.</p> <p>"According to the existing studies and analysis, I can say that even a limited Russian military attack on Ukrainian territory would mean tens of thousands of refugees crossing our border," Slovakian Defense Minister Jaroslav Nad said.</p> <p>Nad said those fleeing a war would receive refugee status.</p> <p>"From the European continent's perspective, the current situation is the most dangerous since World War II," Nad said.</p>

	Czech Interior Minister Vit Rakusan has offered to send police officers to help Slovakia in the case of such a conflict.
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HEADLINE	02/14 Brazil decrees: boost mining of Amazon
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/brazils-bolsonaro-issues-decrees-boost-mining-amazon-82880669
GIST	<p>RIO DE JANEIRO -- Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has issued two decrees to drive gold prospecting with a focus on the Amazon rainforest, according to the texts published Monday in the official gazette.</p> <p>The Program to Support Development of Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining created by one decree aims to strengthen policies and stimulate best practices, according to the text. The Amazon “will be the priority region for the development of works,” it says.</p> <p>The other alters existing laws and regulations, for example requiring the nation's mining regulator to establish simplified criteria for the analysis of permit requests for prospecting.</p> <p>The measures spurred outrage from environmental and Indigenous rights groups, which warned they would exacerbate the illegal destruction of the world's largest tropical rainforest and pollution of its waterways with mercury, used to separate gold.</p> <p>“They run opposite to what the federal government should be doing,” Larissa Rodrigues, portfolio manager for an environmental think tank Choices Institute, said by phone. “There is enormous illegality circulating in the chain that is measurable. The government should be concerned about controlling that chain and not giving more stimulus to it.”</p> <p>Bolsonaro has been an outspoken champion of mining the Amazon since his presidential campaign in 2018, promising to unearth the rainforest's vast mineral wealth. In doing so, he garnered vast support from prospectors. He is widely expected to run for reelection in October.</p> <p>Nongovernment organizations have been sounding the alarm about how both the president's comments and the reduction of environmental oversight during his term have emboldened illegal miners and spurred a gold rush, wreaking vast damage where they work.</p> <p>But Bolsonaro, the son of a prospector himself, has been unmoved. He characterizes prospecting as one of the few alternatives available to people living in a vast, poor region with few opportunities.</p> <p>“Prospecting represents elevated potential for the generation of wealth and income for a population of hundreds of thousands of people,” according to a statement from the secretary general of the presidency.</p> <p>An Associated Press investigation last month found that illegal landing strips and unauthorized airplanes have helped prospectors carry out tons of gold mined on Indigenous lands. The gold ends up in the hands of brokers, some of whom are under investigation by authorities for receiving gold from illegal mining — facilitated by a widespread lack of traceability. The gold is refined in Sao Paulo before becoming part of the global supply chain.</p> <p>Rodrigues' Choices Institute released a study last week that found 229 tons of gold with indications of illegality were sold from 2015 to 2020, or roughly half of national production — most of which originated in the Amazon. The study was based on the analysis of more than 40,000 sale records and satellite images of production sites.</p> <p>Rodrigues added that the simplification of the mining regulator's permit process could usher in a wave of new requests or clearing of the agency's backlog of requests, causing “complete lack of control.”</p>

	<p>One of the decrees creates a multiagency commission charged with developing policies to foment what it terms “artisanal mining,” and which it says will be sustainable.</p> <p>However, most gold prospecting in the Amazon is far from artisanal, employing generators and heavy machinery for digging trenches and dredging rivers.</p> <p>Beto Marubo, an Indigenous leader in the Javari Valley, a remote region of Brazil bordering Peru, said on Twitter that the decree represents “another incentive for the destruction of the rivers, the forests, the life in our communities.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 New Zealand confronts anti-vax protesters
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-wellington-new-zealand-arrests-7ea0f3a7ae442f486314278d76433ceb
GIST	<p>WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand’s prime minister on Monday said protesters who oppose coronavirus mandates were using “intimidation and harassment,” as authorities appeared to take a harsher stance toward the convoy of demonstrators that has disrupted the capital of Wellington for nearly a week.</p> <p>Police initially let the protesters set up tents and camp on the grounds of New Zealand’s Parliament before arresting 122 people on Thursday and then backing off again. The size of the protest dropped to a few hundred last week but increased again to around 3,000 over the weekend.</p> <p>Speaking with reporters, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern signaled the thinning patience of authorities.</p> <p>“I very clearly have a view on the protesters and the way that they’ve conducted their protest because it has moved beyond sharing a view to intimidation and harassment of the people around central Wellington,” she said. “That cannot be tolerated.”</p> <p>Parliament Speaker Trevor Mallard tried to make the protesters uncomfortable last week by turning on lawn sprinklers and blasting out decades-old Barry Manilow songs and the 1990s hit “Macarena” on a repeat loop.</p> <p>Police on Monday told protesters to move their illegally parked vehicles as soon as possible, offering them alternative parking at a nearby stadium.</p> <p>“Wellingtonians have the right to move freely and safely around the city so all roads being clear is a top priority,” said Superintendent Corrie Parnell, the Wellington district commander.</p> <p>The protesters, who oppose coronavirus vaccine mandates and were inspired by similar protests in Canada, appear fairly well organized after trucking in portable toilets, crates of donated food, and bales of straw to lay down when the grass turned to mud.</p> <p>Despite the arrests and scuffles with police last week, dozens of tents remain on Parliament’s grounds, with cars and trucks blocking surrounding streets. Protesters lined up on Monday for a breakfast of barbecued sausages and schnitzels after surviving a weekend of torrential rain.</p> <p>Kacheeya Scarrow drove her van about 380 kilometers (235 miles) from the town of Taupo to join the camp out.</p> <p>“All I want is the mandates lifted, and freedom of choice,” she said. “I’m not anti-vax, I’m not pro-vax. Everybody should have the right to choose what they want to do with their own body.”</p> <p>Another protester, 70-year-old Joanna Plows, said the government had usurped the right “to choose whether or not we have medical intervention.”</p>

	<p>New Zealand has mandated that certain workers get vaccinated against COVID-19, including teachers, doctors, nurses, police and military personnel. A vaccine pass is also required to enter most stores and restaurants.</p> <p>The protests come just as New Zealand experiences its first widespread outbreak of COVID-19, after keeping its borders closed for much of the pandemic. Daily case numbers jumped to a new high of nearly 1,000 on Monday, up from about 200 per day just five days earlier.</p> <p>However, not a single patient was in intensive care, thanks in part to a vaccination rate of 77% and what experts have described as the comparatively less severe symptoms of the omicron variant.</p> <p>New Zealand was spared the worst of the pandemic after it closed its borders and implemented strict lockdowns, limiting the spread of the virus. The nation has reported just 53 virus deaths among its population of 5 million.</p> <p>Ardern said the timing of the mass camp out couldn't be worse.</p> <p>"At the very point where we are seeing an increase in cases, and an increase in risk to the public health and wellbeing of New Zealand, they want to see removed the very measures that have kept us safe, well and alive," she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Saudis destroy Houthi UAV telecom center
SOURCE	https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3473741/arab-coalition-destroys-armed-drone-communication-system-yemen
GIST	<p>The Saudi-led Arab coalition accused on Monday the Iran-backed Houthi militias in Yemen of using government ministry buildings to launch military attacks.</p> <p>"We have destroyed a communication system used to operate drone control stations," the coalition was quoted as saying by the official Saudi news agency SPA.</p> <p>"The Houthis are using the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technology in Sanaa for hostile operations," it added.</p> <p>The coalition said the raids were in response to a drone attack Thursday on Saudi Arabia's Abha International Airport near the border which left 12 injured by falling debris after the Saudi military blew up the bomb-laden projectile.</p> <p>The coalition had warned it would strike positions from which the Houthis launch drones in Sanaa and asked civilians to leave civilian areas used for military purposes.</p> <p>"The Houthis are using state ministries to launch hostile operations," the coalition said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 US urges Americans in Belarus to leave
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/us-urges-americans-belarus-part-moldova-leave-now/story?id=82890184
GIST	<p>The State Department has escalated its warning to U.S. citizens in Belarus, where thousands of Russian troops have massed for menacing military exercises -- now urging them to leave the country "immediately."</p>

The stark new warning comes as U.S. officials fear a possible [Russian attack on neighboring Ukraine](#) could unfold in the coming days, prompting the State Department to shutter its embassy facility in the capital Kyiv and relocate them to the western city Lviv.

Belarus and Russia launched military exercises Thursday, bringing thousands of Russian troops and advanced weaponry and equipment to the landlocked country that borders [both Russia and Ukraine](#). Its strongman leader, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, has drawn increasingly closer to Russian President Vladimir Putin after cracking down on political opposition, fomenting a migrant crisis in Europe and facing tough Western sanctions.

The State Department had already urged American citizens "do not travel to Belarus" because of that domestic crackdown and the risk of "arbitrary enforcement of laws" and detention, as well as COVID-19. But in a new advisory Monday evening, it added a warning about the "unusual and concerning Russian military buildup along Belarus' border with Ukraine" and added, "U.S. citizens in Belarus should depart immediately via commercial or private means."

The "situation is unpredictable, and there is heightened tension in the region," the advisory states, mirroring the increasingly urgent tone from the U.S. embassy in Ukraine, which urged Americans on Saturday to "depart immediately" as well.

The warning also noted, "The U.S. government's ability to provide routine or emergency services to U.S. citizens in Belarus is already severely limited due to Belarusian government limitations on U.S. Embassy staffing."

The embassy in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, had previously ordered the departure of family members on Jan. 31, with a very small group of U.S. diplomats still in the country.

In addition, the State Department is urging Americans to "depart immediately" from Transnistria, which is part of Moldova -- the landlocked country on Ukraine's southwestern border.

The urgent warning doesn't apply to the entire country, but just to Transnistria, an unrecognized breakaway region where Russia has stationed troops against the Moldovan government's will as "peacekeepers," similar to Russian troops in two disputed regions of Georgia, the small former Soviet republic.

Like Belarus, Moldova had been on the State Department's Level 4: "Do Not Travel" list because of COVID-19, but now in its new advisory, it warns of the "unusual and concerning Russian military activity around Ukraine, and the unresolved conflict between the breakaway region of Transnistria and the central government; U.S. citizens in Transnistria should depart immediately."

U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, have repeatedly referenced Transnistria during the current crisis as another example of Russia's aggression in the region in recent years, along with Georgia and Ukraine.

Ukrainian officials went even further last month. Its defense intelligence agency said it had evidence that Russia was planning a false flag provocation against its own soldiers in Transnistria to justify an invasion of Ukraine -- an accusation the Russian government denied.

The Biden administration has said it will not use [the U.S. military](#) to help evacuate American citizens if war breaks out in the region -- with the memory of Afghanistan hanging over them. That historic, chaotic operation ultimately evacuated some 124,000 people, but the State Department has made clear it was not a precedent.

Instead, the U.S. has used increasingly dire warnings to private Americans in Ukraine and now Belarus and Transnistria to leave now while commercial flight options or land border crossings are available.

Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	02/15 Shields Up: CISA recommendations
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/dhs/shields-up-cisa-recommends-all-organizations-adopt-heightened-cybersecurity-posture/
GIST	<p>Every organization in the United States is at risk from cyber threats that can disrupt essential services and potentially result in impacts to public safety. Over the past year, cyber incidents have impacted many companies, non-profits, and other organizations, large and small, across multiple sectors of the economy.</p> <p>Notably, the Russian government has used cyber as a key component of their force projection over the last decade, including previously in Ukraine in the 2015 timeframe. The Russian government understands that disabling or destroying critical infrastructure—including power and communications—can augment pressure on a country’s government, military and population and accelerate their acceding to Russian objectives.</p> <p>While there are not currently any specific credible threats to the U.S. homeland, we are mindful of the potential for the Russian government to consider escalating its destabilizing actions in ways that may impact others outside of Ukraine.</p> <p>Based on this situation, CISA has been working closely with our critical infrastructure partners over the past several months to ensure awareness of potential threats—part of a paradigm shift from being reactive to being proactive.</p> <p>CISA recommends all organizations—regardless of size—adopt a heightened posture when it comes to cybersecurity and protecting their most critical assets. Recommended actions include:</p> <p>Reduce the likelihood of a damaging cyber intrusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Validate that all remote access to the organization’s network and privileged or administrative access requires multi-factor authentication.• Ensure that software is up to date, prioritizing updates that address known exploited vulnerabilities identified by CISA.• Confirm that the organization’s IT personnel have disabled all ports and protocols that are not essential for business purposes.• If the organization is using cloud services, ensure that IT personnel have reviewed and implemented strong controls outlined in CISA’s guidance.• Sign up for CISA’s free cyber hygiene services, including vulnerability scanning, to help reduce exposure to threats. <p>Take steps to quickly detect a potential intrusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure that cybersecurity/IT personnel are focused on identifying and quickly assessing any unexpected or unusual network behavior. Enable logging in order to better investigate issues or events.• Confirm that the organization’s entire network is protected by antivirus/antimalware software and that signatures in these tools are updated.• If working with Ukrainian organizations, take extra care to monitor, inspect, and isolate traffic from those organizations; closely review access controls for that traffic. <p>Ensure that the organization is prepared to respond if an intrusion occurs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Designate a crisis-response team with main points of contact for a suspected cybersecurity incident and roles/responsibilities within the organization, including technology, communications, legal and business continuity.• Assure availability of key personnel; identify means to provide surge support for responding to an incident.

- Conduct a tabletop exercise to ensure that all participants understand their roles during an incident.

Maximize the organization's resilience to a destructive cyber incident

- Test backup procedures to ensure that critical data can be rapidly restored if the organization is impacted by ransomware or a destructive cyberattack; ensure that backups are isolated from network connections.
- If using industrial control systems or operational technology, conduct a test of manual controls to ensure that critical functions remain operable if the organization's network is unavailable or untrusted.

By implementing the steps above, all organizations can make near-term progress toward improving cybersecurity and resilience. In addition, while recent cyber incidents have not been attributed to specific actors, CISA urges cybersecurity/IT personnel at every organization to review [Understanding and Mitigating Russian State-Sponsored Cyber Threats to U.S. Critical Infrastructure](#). CISA also recommends organizations visit [StopRansomware.gov](#), a centralized, whole-of-government webpage providing ransomware resources and alerts.

As the nation's cyber defense agency, CISA is available to help organizations improve cybersecurity and resilience, including through cybersecurity experts assigned across the country. In the event of a cyber incident, CISA is able to offer assistance to victim organizations and use information from incident reports to protect other possible victims. All organizations should report incidents and anomalous activity to [CISA](#) and/or the FBI via your [local FBI field office](#) or the FBI's 24/7 CyWatch at (855) 292-3937 or CyWatch@fbi.gov.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Countries emerge as hacking threats
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/these-new-countries-are-emerging-as-hacking-threats-as-more-hostile-governments-invest-in-offensive-cyber-capabilities/
GIST	<p>The number of hostile nation-state hacking operations is rising as new countries invest in cyber-intrusion campaigns and existing state-backed attack groups take advantage of the rise in organisations adopting cloud applications.</p> <p>CrowdStrike's 2022 Global Threat Report details how the cyber-threat landscape has evolved during the past year. One of those developments is the rise of new countries engaging in offensive cyber operations, including Turkey and Columbia.</p> <p>In accordance with CrowdStrike's naming conventions, attacks by Turkish-linked groups are detailed as attacks by 'Wolf' while attacks by Colombian operations have been Dubbed 'Ocelot' – in a similar way to how cybersecurity researchers name Russian government-backed activity 'Bear' or Chinese hacking groups 'Panda'.</p> <p>Activity by one of these new groups is detailed in the report; a Turkish-based hacking group, dubbed Cosmic Wolf by researchers, targeted data of an unspecified victim stored within an Amazon Web Services (AWS) cloud environment in April 2021.</p> <p>The attackers were able to break into the AWS cloud environment using stolen usernames and passwords, which also provided the attackers with the privileges required to alter command lines. That means they were able to alter security settings to allow direct Secure Shell Protocol (SSH) access to AWS from their own infrastructure, enabling the theft of data.</p> <p>Ultimately, countries are seeing that cyber campaigns can be easier to conduct than traditional espionage and are investing in these techniques.</p>

"There are a lot of countries out there that look at this and realise it's cheaper, it's easier and it's got plausible deniability built into it," Adam Meyers, senior vice president of Intelligence at CrowdStrike, told ZDNet.

"That's what's happening – we're seeing more countries have developed these programmes and they're going to get better at it over time."

One of the reasons countries are increasing their offensive cyber capabilities is due to the impact of the global pandemic. Lockdowns and stringent travel checks made it harder for traditional espionage techniques to be effective, leading towards investment in cyber operations.

"It's created a little bit more demand or accelerated planning around developing cyber capabilities for some of these countries that would have perhaps relied on other means previously," said Meyers.

The shift towards cloud applications and cloud IT services has also played [an unwitting role in making cyberattacks easier](#). The rise of hybrid working means many employees aren't based in an office, instead connecting remotely via collaborative applications, VPNs and other services – using a username and password.

That makes being productive while working remotely simpler for employees – but it's also made things simpler for hacking groups, who can secretly access networks with a stolen – or guessed – username and password.

Some of the biggest cybersecurity incidents of recent years, [like the SolarWinds and Microsoft Exchange attacks](#), have demonstrated how an attack targeting cloud services and cloud supply chains could be powerful, particularly if cloud is misconfigured or poorly monitored.

"As organisations are moving to the cloud and looking to develop better capabilities, threat actors are moving there as well," said Meyers.

There are, however, steps that organisations can take to help make their networks and their cloud infrastructure more resistant to cyberattacks, including the adoption of [a zero-trust strategy](#) of not trusting devices connecting to the network by default.

The research paper also recommends that organisations work towards eliminating misconfigurations in their cloud applications and services by setting up default patterns for setting up cloud, so when new accounts are set up, it's done in a predictable manner, minimising the possibility of human error going undetected. Cloud architecture should also be monitored and maintained with security updates, like any other software.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Moscow businesses in crypto-laundering?
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/money-laundering-cryptocurrency-russia-chainalysis/
GIST	<p>Moscow-based businesses appear to be handling much of the money laundering of cryptocurrency payments that come from global ransomware activity and other forms of cybercrime, according to a report from crypto-tracking company Chainalysis.</p> <p>The analysts focused on several dozen companies with a presence in Moscow City, the Russian capital's skyscraper-packed business district. In any given quarter, "illicit and risky" blockchain addresses account for between 29% and 48% of all funds received by those cryptocurrency businesses, the report says. That traffic, including legitimate crypto transactions, can sometimes be more than \$1 billion in a quarter, Chainalysis says.</p> <p>"A huge amount of cryptocurrency-based money laundering, not just of ransomware funds but of funds associated with other forms of cybercrime as well, goes through services with substantial operations in</p>

Russia,” Chainalysis says in the Monday blog post, which is based on its upcoming “2022 Crypto Crime Report.”

The company defines “risky or illicit” addresses as those “connected to entities that, while not necessarily inherently criminal, are frequently linked to criminal activity, such as high-risk exchanges and mixers,” meaning the kinds of services that try to hide the tracks of cryptocurrency payments’ origins.

The Moscow City company Garantex, for example, handled cryptocurrency worth about \$2.1 billion from the beginning of 2019 until the end of 2021, and more than \$645 million of that was associated with addresses Chainalysis deems illicit. Another business, Bitzlato, handled more than \$2 billion in crypto overall during that period, with more than \$966 million worth of it coming from illicit addresses.

Some of the companies studied “are big enough that despite receiving millions of dollars’ worth of funds from illicit addresses, those funds only represent 10% or less of all cryptocurrency they receive. Those instances could be attributed to the business’s lack of knowledge, rather than purposeful criminal activity,” Chainalysis says. “But for other Moscow City cryptocurrency businesses, illicit funds make up as much as 30% or more of all cryptocurrency received, which suggests those businesses may be making a concerted effort to serve a cybercriminal clientele.”

Chainalysis did not analyze the potential effects of Russian law enforcement’s January sting against [the REvil ransomware gang](#), noting that analysts have said the arrests “may not indicate true commitment to fighting ransomware.” Russian agencies also have [cracked down on dark web cybercrime forums](#) recently. Those actions came against the backdrop of Russia’s troop buildup outside Ukraine, and experts have said Russia could be just trying to show that its agenda isn’t completely unaligned with Western interests.

U.S. law enforcement recently made its biggest arrest yet in a cryptocurrency money-laundering case: A New York couple, including one spouse who drew attention for her rap performances as “Razzlekhan,” were arrested last week on [charges of conspiring to launder](#) \$4.5 billion in crypto stolen from the Bitfinex exchange in 2016.

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HEADLINE	02/15 MyloBot malware sends sextortion emails
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/new-mylobot-malware-variant-sends.html
GIST	<p>A new version of the MyloBot malware has been observed to deploy malicious payloads that are being used to send sextortion emails demanding victims to pay \$2,732 in digital currency.</p> <p>MyloBot, first detected in 2018, is known to feature an array of sophisticated anti-debugging capabilities and propagation techniques to rope infected machines into a botnet, not to mention remove traces of other competing malware from the systems.</p> <p>Chief among its methods to evade detection and stay under the radar included a delay of 14 days before accessing its command-and-control servers and the facility to execute malicious binaries directly from memory.</p> <p>MyloBot also leverages a technique called process hollowing, wherein the attack code is injected into a suspended and hollowed process in order to circumvent process-based defenses. This is achieved by unmapping the memory allocated to the live process and replacing it with the arbitrary code to be executed, in this case a decoded resource file.</p> <p>"The second stage executable then creates a new folder under C:\ProgramData," Minerva Labs researcher Natalie Zargarov said in a report. "It looks for svchost.exe under a system directory and executes it in suspended state. Using an APC injection technique, it injects itself into the spawned svchost.exe process."</p> <p>APC injection, similar to process hollowing, is also a process injection technique that enables the insertion of malicious code into an existing victim process via the asynchronous procedure call (APC) queue.</p>

	<p>The next phase of the infection involves establishing persistence on the compromised host, using the foothold as a stepping stone to establish communications with a remote server to fetch and execute a payload that, in turn, decodes and runs the final-stage malware.</p> <p>This malware is designed to abuse the endpoint to send extortion messages alluding to the recipients' online behaviors, such as visiting porn sites, and threatening to leak a video that was allegedly recorded by breaking into their computers' webcam.</p> <p>Minerva Labs' analysis of the malware also reveals its ability to download additional files, suggesting that the threat actor left behind a backdoor for carrying out further attacks.</p> <p>"This threat actor went through a lot of trouble to drop the malware and keep it undetected, only to use it as an extortion mail sender," Zargarov said. "Botnets are dangerous exactly because of this unknown upcoming threat. It could just as easily drop and execute ransomware, spyware, worms, or other threats on all infected endpoints."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Experts: aviation, defense sectors target
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/experts-warn-of-hacking-group-targeting.html
GIST	<p>Entities in the aviation, aerospace, transportation, manufacturing, and defense industries have been targeted by a persistent threat group since at least 2017 as part of a string of spear-phishing campaigns mounted to deliver a variety of remote access trojans (RATs) on compromised systems.</p> <p>The use of commodity malware such as AsyncRAT and NetWire, among others, has led enterprise security firm Proofpoint to a "cybercriminal threat actor" codenamed TA2541 that employs "broad targeting with high volume messages." The ultimate objective of the intrusions is unknown as yet.</p> <p>Social engineering lures used by the group does not rely on topical themes but rather leverages decoy messages related to aviation, logistics, transportation, and travel. That said, TA2541 did briefly pivot to COVID-19-themed lures in the spring of 2020, distributing emails concerning cargo shipments of personal protective equipment (PPE) or testing kits.</p> <p>"While TA2541 is consistent in some behaviors, such as using emails masquerading as aviation companies to distribute remote access trojans, other tactics such as delivery method, attachments, URLs, infrastructure, and malware type have changed," Sherrod DeGrippo, vice president of threat research and detection at Proofpoint, told The Hacker News.</p> <p>While earlier versions of the campaign utilized macro-laden Microsoft Word attachments to drop the RAT payload, recent attacks include links to cloud services hosting the malware. The phishing attacks are said to strike hundreds of organizations globally, with recurring targets observed in North America, Europe, and the Middle East.</p> <p>The repeated use of the same themes aside, select infection chains have also involved the use of Discord app URLs that point to compressed files containing AgentTesla or Imminent Monitor malware, indicative of the malicious use of content delivery networks to distribute information gathering implants for remotely controlling compromised machines.</p> <p>"Mitigating threats hosted on legitimate services continues to be a difficult vector to defend against as it likely involves implementation of a robust detection stack or policy-based blocking of services which might be business-relevant," DeGrippo said.</p> <p>Other techniques of interest employed by TA2541 include the use of Virtual Private Servers (VPS) for their email sending infrastructure and dynamic DNS for command-and-control (C2) activities.</p>

	<p>With Microsoft announcing plans to turn off macros by default for internet-downloaded files starting April 2022, the move is expected to cause threat actors to step up and shift to other methods should macros become an inefficient method of delivery.</p> <p>"While macro-laden Office documents are among the most frequently used techniques leading to download and execution of malicious payloads, abuse of legitimate hosting services is also already widespread," DeGripio explained.</p> <p>"Further, we regularly observe actors 'containerize' payloads, using archive and image files (e.g., .ZIP, .ISO, etc.) which also can impact ability to detect and analyze in some environments. As always, threat actors will pivot to use what is effective."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 'Info sharing' to 'operational collaboration'
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/apt/feds-say-goodbye-to-information-sharing-hello-to-operational-collaboration
GIST	<p>For years, the federal government has touted greater information sharing between government and industry as a key pillar in the strategy to protect businesses and keep essential services and infrastructure running in the face of an onslaught of new and evolving threats in cyberspace.</p> <p>But somewhere along the way the term became something of a punchline, an empty phrase that tended to mean more of the same overly broad, ineffective, one-way flow of telemetry or indicators of compromise to companies who often had little idea how to make use of it. More and more, government officials are ditching the phrase in favor of and opting for terms that imply there's something deeper going on these days in the partnership between industry and government.</p> <p>"I really hate the word 'information sharing.' I'd actually rather use something like 'operational coordination' or 'collaboration,' because 'information sharing,' to me, is very transactional and antiquated," said Morgan Adamski, director of the National Security Agency's Cybersecurity Collaboration Center during a virtual event Monday hosted by ICS cybersecurity firm Dragos.</p> <p>She doesn't think the phrase adequately captures the positive feedback loop that happens from ongoing conversation between companies and agencies like the NSA.</p> <p>"To be honest with you, one of the things that we found when we started to engage in this timely, relevant manner with our infrastructure owners is that they had insights that we had never thought about before, and what it started to do was to really actually shift in gear the way that NSA thought about the information that it wanted to share with people," Adamski said.</p> <p>Traditionally, information sharing has involved the static flow of telemetry, indicators of compromise and other data points to businesses with little in the way of context, actionable intelligence or consideration for resource constraints. This definition really constitutes the "least mature way that you can coordinate," said Mark Bristow, branch chief of cyber defense coordination at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA).</p> <p>Those kinds of static indicators have become less useful over the years as threat actors have gotten better at covering their tracks and evolved their tactics, techniques and procedures, while the cybersecurity community is increasingly coalescing around the concept of tracking commonalities in the behavior of different hacking groups as a way to spot malicious activity on victim networks.</p> <p>"We need to mature that paradigm as a community and move away from...what I call the atomic observables space, where IP addresses and domains and...hashes [are emphasized] and really move more into understanding adversarial tactics and kill chains so that we can start to look for what the adversary might do," Bristow said.</p>

The comments came as Dragos announced that it would be adding the NSA and CISA as “trusted advisers” to the Neighborhood Keeper program, a free, anonymous data sharing network between electric sector entities that relies on high-fidelity network sensors that provide real-time, continuous monitoring of threats around Operational Technology and ICS systems.

“Through this public-private partnership, Dragos’s Neighborhood Keeper will be used by the NSA and CISA under Trusted Advisor roles, enabling their analysts to gain visibility into ICS/OT cyber threats facing the industrial infrastructure community,” the company said in a press release Monday. “As Trusted Advisors, government analysts will have the ability to view anonymized, aggregate information about threat analytics, vulnerabilities, and Indicators of compromise as they are detected. They can then share relevant threat intelligence back to members in Neighborhood Keeper in real time, thus enabling the greater infrastructure community to collectively defend itself against cyber adversaries.”

"Information sharing" a loaded phrase for government and industry

The desire to ditch the phrase "information sharing" is a common sentiment from government and industry. In 2019 former CISA Director Chris Krebs said he was "sick" of the term and the way it has been characterized as a panacea for the country's cyber ills.

"It's not '[and] we have to get beyond information sharing' — we have to work together to understand what our respective advantages are, protect the American people, our networks and counter the adversary. We don't do it by sharing [Indicators of Compromise]."

Apart from the desire for a rebrand, there are indications across the federal government that the shift is more than rhetoric. New cybersecurity "nerve centers" designed to put representatives from government and industry in the same room to work on shared problems have popped up at [CISA](#) and [the NSA](#) the Department of Energy and other agencies. Agencies like the NSA have also said they've worked over the years to synthesize the signals intelligence they collect around emerging cybersecurity threats or campaigns into insights at the unclassified level, where they can be shared and acted upon by individual organizations.

Kate Marks, deputy assistant secretary at the Department of Energy’s Office of Cybersecurity, Energy and Emergency Response, said the agency is currently working on four lines of effort around the electricity sector that sprang from President Joe Biden’s national security memorandum on boosting [industrial control system security](#) last year. The push revolves around encouraging companies to adopt technologies and systems that give utilities “greater visibility into the networks that really control system operations and help to improve” collective detection, mitigation and response capabilities.

CESER is working with companies to encourage adoption and installation of new network sensor technologies and develop financial incentives. It is also looking to establish an energy threat analysis center to share threat information across industry and government. Officials are working on a “common lexicon” for data sharing, a platform that can process data across different sensors and technologies and allow for the develop of behavior analytics. Finally, the agency wants to have programs in place to provide support to smaller or less resourced companies around where and how to place the sensors.

It’s one example of the way federal officials are working to rebrand “information sharing” — a term that has gradually morphed into a punchline as defenders have complained about the lack of timely or actionable intelligence around cybersecurity threats — to something deeper, an “operational collaboration” between the government and private sector.

While success with this model is often described in broad (and sometimes vague) terms, both public and private sector cybersecurity experts have pointed to potential near misses with damaging vulnerabilities.

The muted impact in the wake of the Log4j vulnerabilities — which have been mostly exploited by coinminers thus far — has been partly [attributed by CISA](#) to "unprecedented" levels of collaboration and the greater muscle memory that has now developed between the federal interagency and industry, where stakeholders worked together to patch the most critical parts of the nation’s attacks surface target and

prioritize essential industries and high-risk organizations for outreach and support. [The tail of Log4j and its ultimate impact may yet be long](#), but officials have made the case that it could have been significantly worse by a more chaotic or disorganized response.

Federal officials are attempting to hammer home the message around government and industry collaboration at the same time that agencies are releasing heightened warnings to the public about the prospects of war between Russia and Ukraine, and [potential spillover in the cyber arena](#).

Last week, in an [alert](#) titled “Shields Up,” CISA warned that virtually all organizations across every industry and sector are vulnerable to hacks that can disrupt critical services, highlighting how these kind of attacks have historically been a staple of the Russian government’s foreign policy in times of crisis. CISA Director Jen Easterly reiterated that this remains a credible — but still hypothetical — possibility that IT security teams should keep in mind when updating their threat models.

“While there are no specific credible threats to the US homeland at this time, we are mindful of the potential for Russia to consider escalating its destabilizing actions in ways that may affect our critical infrastructure, to include cascading impacts as we saw [with] NotPetya,” Easterly wrote [Feb. 12 on Twitter](#).

It also comes as the U.S., U.K. and Australian governments combined on a [joint advisory](#) last week that ransomware groups with a [nebulous relationship](#) to the Russian government have increasingly targeted nearly every major critical infrastructure sector in their countries, from energy and healthcare to local governments, schools technology companies and the food supply.

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HEADLINE	02/14 CISA: potential for Russia cyberattacks
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/cisa-again-warns-us-organizations-potential-russian-cyberattacks
GIST	<p>The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) is urging organizations to strengthen their security stance and stay on alert for potential Russian cyberattacks.</p> <p>Over the past years, Russia-linked cyberattacks have targeted organizations of all sizes, across a large number of verticals, meaning that all should ensure they have a response and recovery plan implemented. According to CISA, all organizations in the U.S. are at risk from cyberattacks that could disrupt essential services and which may even impact public safety.</p> <p>“The Russian government understands that disabling or destroying critical infrastructure – including power and communications – can augment pressure on a country’s government, military and population and accelerate their acceding to Russian objectives,” the agency notes.</p> <p>Previously, Russian threat actors – believed to be working on behalf of Moscow – were observed launching disruptive attacks against Ukraine, but also targeting the elections process in the US and elsewhere.</p> <p>Although it is not aware of a specific threat to U.S. organizations, amid increasing tensions at the Ukraine border, the Russian government may consider “escalating its destabilizing actions” to impact entities outside of Ukraine, CISA says.</p> <p>This alert comes just weeks after several U.S. government agencies, including CISA, issued a joint advisory to provide an overview of cyber operations linked to Russia.</p> <p>Thus, the agency has been working with critical infrastructure partners to increase awareness of potential threats, and is now urging all organizations to be proactive and make sure their most critical assets are well defended in the event of an attack.</p> <p>To strengthen their security, organizations should ensure multi-factor authentication is enabled for all remote access to their environments, including privileged or administrative access; keep all software</p>

updated and prioritize patching against known exploited vulnerabilities; disable all unused ports and protocols; and ensure that strong controls are implemented for all cloud services that may be in use.

Furthermore, organizations should ensure that their cybersecurity/IT personnel can quickly identify and address unusual network behavior; keep their environments protected with security products; make sure that a response plan is implemented in the event of an intrusion; and maximize resilience to destructive cyberattacks.

“If working with Ukrainian organizations, take extra care to monitor, inspect, and isolate traffic from those organizations; closely review access controls for that traffic,” CISA notes.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Report: 28,695 vulnerabilities disclosed
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/over-28000-vulnerabilities-disclosed-2021-report
GIST	<p>Risk Based Security on Monday released its vulnerability report for 2021 and revealed that a record-breaking 28,695 flaws were disclosed last year, which represents a significant increase from the 23,269 disclosed in 2020.</p> <p>Of the vulnerabilities disclosed in 2021, more than 4,100 are remotely exploitable, have a public exploit available, and also have a patch or mitigation. By focusing on these security holes first, organizations could reduce risk by 86%, according to the vulnerability and data breach intelligence company.</p> <p>On the other hand, to put that 4,100 into context, the known exploited vulnerabilities catalog maintained by CISA, which tracks issues disclosed over the past decade, only contains 360 entries.</p> <p>The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have had some impact on vulnerability disclosures, starting with the first quarter of 2020, when there was a significantly lower number of disclosures. Risk Based Security (RBS) also noticed that disclosures slowed down in the first half of 2021, but they picked up in the second half of the year.</p> <p>“In the 2021 Mid Year 2021 Report, the difference between 2020 and 2021 was only around 400. In the second half of the year, that gap then increased by over 3,500,” the company said in its latest report. “This is a considerable increase, further lending to the idea that we are seeing the disclosure landscape shake off the pandemic as researchers return to their normal output.”</p> <p>As for the products with the most vulnerabilities discovered in 2021, the top 10 mostly includes Linux distributions. Google’s Pixel devices also made the top 10. Pixel phones ranked 12 in 2020 and moved up to the fifth place in 2021, but the number of vulnerabilities was roughly the same in both years.</p> <p>One significant change in 2021 is that the top 10 does not include any version of Windows. Furthermore, in the list of top vendors, Microsoft dropped from second place in 2020 to fifth in 2021. However, this could be explained by the fact that 2020 was — as RBS puts it — “an unusually bad year for Microsoft,” with nearly 1,600 vulnerabilities, up from 940 in the previous year.</p> <p>It’s worth noting that 29% of the vulnerabilities cataloged by RBS do not have a CVE identifier.</p> <p>“The good news is that the industry is starting to make big leaps in how it views vulnerability management. Firms like Gartner are catching on to the inefficiencies caused by reliance on vulnerability scanners, while government agencies like the Cybersecurity Infrastructure and Security Agency are pushing for organizations to focus their prioritization on metadata like exploitability, rather than severity,” RBS said in its report.</p> <p>It added, “All of these movements are educating organizations that it can be possible to proactively manage risk, rather than always reacting to it. As enterprises take the steps in assessing those possibilities, security teams will come to realize that it will all come down to the quality of data. To make informed</p>

	<p>risk-decisions, they will come to understand that comprehensive, actionable, and timely vulnerability intelligence will be critical, and that it won't be found in the public source.”</p> <p>Earlier this year, RBS announced getting acquired by threat intelligence company Flashpoint.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Ransom payments: 74% linked to Russia
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/three-quarters-ransomware-payments/
GIST	<p>Around three-quarters (74%) of ransomware revenue resulted from attacks associated with Russia in 2021, according to a new report by blockchain investigations and analytics company Chainalysis.</p> <p>The researchers found that more than \$400m worth of cryptocurrency went to ransomware strains “highly likely” to be affiliated with Russia in some way last year. These connections were made based on three criteria:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The attack was conducted by the notorious Russian-based Evil Corp gang, whose leadership is believed to have ties to the Russian government. 2. The ransomware strain avoided countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an intergovernmental organization of Russian-speaking, former Soviet countries. These ransomware strains contain code that prevents the encryption of files if it detects the victim’s operating system is located in a CIS country. 3. Others characteristics that indicated the strain was based in Russia. These include strains that share documents and announcements in the Russian language or whose affiliates are located in Russia. <p>In addition, Chainalysis revealed that most of the extorted funds arising from ransomware attacks are laundered through services primarily catering to Russian users. For example, it estimated that 13% of funds sent from ransomware addresses to services went to users thought to be located in Russia. This is more than any other region.</p> <p>The researchers also provided an analysis of several dozen cryptocurrency businesses operating in Moscow City, Russia’s financial district. They claimed these businesses are heavily involved in laundering digital currencies, with illicit and risky addresses accounting for between 29% and 48% of all funds they received in any given quarter.</p> <p>In the three years from 2019-2021, these firms received nearly \$700m from illicit and risky addresses. This was primarily comprised of scams (\$313m) and darknet markets (\$296m), with ransomware extortion payments making up \$38m.</p> <p>The researchers noted that illicit funds make up as much as 30% of all cryptocurrency received by some of these companies, “which suggests those businesses may be making a concerted effort to serve a cyber-criminal clientele.” Interestingly, over half of the cryptocurrency businesses analyzed reportedly operate in the same Moscow City skyscraper, Federation Tower.</p> <p>The report acknowledged that Russian authorities arrested 14 affiliates of the REvil ransomware gang last month, suggesting that “change may be on the way for Russia’s cryptocurrency ecosystem.”</p> <p>Chainalysis stated: “Regardless of what the future holds, it’s important to understand where things stand now: Russian cyber-criminal organizations are some of the biggest perpetrators of cryptocurrency-based crime – especially ransomware – and local cryptocurrency businesses provide money laundering services that enable this activity. 2021 saw positive momentum against this issue, from the seizure of funds from ransomware organization DarkSide to the sanctioning of Suex and Chatex.”</p> <p>Last week, Chainalysis revealed it had observed the average ransomware payment size to have surged in recent years, from \$25,000 in 2019 to \$88,000 a year later and \$118,000 in 2021.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Data breach at Morley Companies
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/data-breach-at-morley-companies/
GIST	<p>The personal information of 521,000 people may have been exposed in a data breach at a business services company based in Saginaw, Michigan.</p> <p>Cyber-criminals targeted Morley Companies last year in an attack detected on August 1, when data in the company's care suddenly became unavailable.</p> <p>On Friday, Michigan attorney general Dana Nessel confirmed that "a data security incident that may have impacted data belonging to current employees, former employees and various clients" had been reported by Morley.</p> <p>Morley said that "leading independent cybersecurity experts" hired by the company to investigate the attack had determined that "additional data may have been obtained from its digital environment."</p> <p>In a data security incident notice, Morley stated that the incident may have involved both personal identifiable information (PII) and protected health information (PHI). Data that may have been compromised included names, addresses, Social Security numbers, dates of birth, client identification numbers, medical diagnostic and treatment information and health insurance information.</p> <p>Nessel warned all the potentially impacted individuals to treat any emails, phone calls and text messages asking for bank information as suspicious.</p> <p>"Watch out for fraudulent emails, phone calls, and text messages seeking personal or banking information in connection to the Morley breach," said Nessel in a statement issued February 11.</p> <p>She added: "If you receive other correspondence that asks you do to something like call a number to confirm your personal information, assume it's a scam."</p> <p>Morley said it began notifying potentially impacted individuals of the incident at the start of February and that it has "made alterations to its cyber environment to help prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future."</p> <p>The company said its investigation into the cyber-attack had found no evidence indicating the misuse of any information potentially involved in the data breach.</p> <p>Morley has provided access to complimentary credit monitoring and identity theft protection services to individuals whose Social Security numbers may have been involved in the incident.</p> <p>The company said: "The privacy and protection of personal and protected health information is a top priority for Morley, which deeply regrets any inconvenience or concern this incident may cause."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 BlackByte breached critical infrastructure
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fbi-blackbyte-ransomware-breached-us-critical-infrastructure/
GIST	<p>The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) revealed that the BlackByte ransomware group has breached the networks of at least three organizations from US critical infrastructure sectors in the last three months.</p> <p>This was disclosed in a TLP:WHITE joint cybersecurity advisory released Friday in coordination with the US Secret Service.</p>

"As of November 2021, BlackByte ransomware had compromised multiple US and foreign businesses, including entities in at least three US critical infrastructure sectors (government facilities, financial, and food & agriculture).," the federal law enforcement agency said [\[PDF\]](#).

"BlackByte is a Ransomware as a Service (RaaS) group that encrypts files on compromised Windows host systems, including physical and virtual servers."

The advisory focuses on providing indicators of compromise (IOCs) that organizations can use to detect and defend against BlackByte's attacks.

The IOCs associated with BlackByte activity shared in the advisory include MD5 hashes of suspicious ASPX files discovered on compromised Microsoft Internet Information Services (IIS) servers and a list of commands the ransomware operators used during attacks.

The 49ers ransomware attack

In related news, NFL's San Francisco 49ers team revealed over the weekend that it's [recovering from a BlackByte ransomware attack](#).

The threat actors claimed the attack, saying that they also stole data from the football org's servers during the incident and leaked almost 300MB worth of files on their data leak blog.

The 49ers confirmed the ransomware attack in a statement to BleepingComputer and said it only caused a temporary disruption to portions of its IT network.

BlackByte ransomware operation has been active [since at least July 2021](#), when it started targeting corporate victims worldwide.

This gang is known for exploiting software vulnerabilities (including Microsoft Exchange Server) to gain initial access to their enterprise targets' network, illustrating that keeping your servers updated will most likely block their attacks.

In October, cybersecurity firm Trustwave [created and released a free BlackByte decryptor](#), enabling some victims to restore their files for free after the ransomware gang used the same decryption/encryption key in multiple attacks.

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HEADLINE	02/14 FTC: VoIP providers share data or get sued
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/ftc-warns-voip-providers-share-your-robocall-info-or-get-sued/
GIST	<p>The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) said today that it will take legal action against Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) service providers who do not hand over information requested during robocall investigations.</p> <p>"Companies that receive FTC Civil Investigative Demands must promptly produce all required information," said Samuel Levine, the Director of FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection.</p> <p>"These demands are not voluntary. Companies that don't respond fully, or don't respond at all, will have to answer to a federal district court judge, as these cases demonstrate."</p> <p>The Commission charged Alcazar Networks in December 2020 with facilitating illegal telemarketing calls after it provided VoIP services to an Indian company that used "911" as the caller ID and impersonated the Social Security Administration.</p> <p>Following the trial, Alcazar Networks was banned from helping telemarketers and overseas customers in attempts to dial robocalls or call phone numbers on the DNC Registry.</p>

The FTC also issued two orders today requiring the [XCast Labs](#) and [Deltracon Inc](#) VoIP service providers to turn over information requested as part of investigations into a series of illegal robocalls.

In both cases, the Commission filed petitions [[1](#), [2](#)] with a federal court to enforce compliance with civil investigative demands issued last month.

"The Commission frequently issues Civil Investigative Demands (CIDs) to VoIP service providers that carry potentially illegal calls to collect important information to help stop the calls, including information about the company's customers and efforts to comply with the Telemarketing Sales Rule," the FTC [said](#).

Millions of robocall complaints each year

To put things into perspective, in October 2020, the FTC said it [received roughly 2 million complaints](#) from Americans regarding illegal robocalls until the end of September.

According to official and up-to-date [FTC data](#), the exact number of received robocall complaints between January and September 2021 is 3,395,386, with 2,554,358 of them being automated and only 841,027 from live callers.

The FTC has taken hundreds of enforcement actions against more than 500 companies and 400 individuals since the US National Do Not Call Registry began accepting registrations 17 years ago.

The US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has also issued an order in May 2020 saying that it [will no longer warn robocallers](#) before fining them for violating the law and harassing US consumers.

FCC's order also increased the maximum penalty for each intentional unlawful robocall to \$10,000, in addition to the FCC-proposed forfeiture penalty amount.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Mizuno hit by ransomware attack
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/sports-brand-mizuno-hit-with-ransomware-attack-delaying-orders/
GIST	<p>Sports equipment and sportswear brand Mizuno is affected by phone outages and order delays after being hit by ransomware, BleepingComputer has learned from sources familiar with the attack.</p> <p>Mizuno is a Japanese sports equipment and sportswear company with over 3,800 employees and locations throughout Asia, Europe, and North America.</p> <p>The company sells a wide variety of sports equipment but are best known for their golf clubs, running sneakers, and baseball gear.</p> <p>Sources who spoke to BleepingComputer on the condition of anonymity said that Mizuno suffered a ransomware attack over the weekend of February 4th, targeting the USA corporate network.</p> <p>This cyberattack led to significant business disruption, including phone outages, delays in shipping products, and website issues.</p> <p>The attack leads to order delays</p> <p>Customers began to notice the outage last Tuesday when the corporate phone systems no longer worked, and the website began displaying a banner warning of order delays.</p> <p>"MIZUNO IS CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING SYSTEM OUTAGES. ORDER DELAYS MAY OCCUR," a notice says at the top of the mizunousa.com website.</p>

Customers who attempted to click on the Contact link for the website were shown messages saying there was an error connecting to that portion of the site.

Customers told BleepingComputer that Mizuno support reps told them that their internal systems were down and they could no longer look up existing orders.

This was further confirmed by users on the Golf RWX forum who have been posting similar experiences since the outage.

"I just had a chat with an Mizuno representative aka 'Caddy', and Caddy told me their whole system is down so no one can even order anything (baseball, golf, softball, volleyball, swimming, training, etc. products) from them at the moment. Caddy also said they're currently working on restoring their system and will be up and running tomorrow at the earliest but could be later than that," a customer [posted](#) on the GolfWRX forums.

Other customers [said they were told](#) that shipping was delayed as Mizuno was unable to print shipping labels and that orders may be [delayed up to a month](#).

The ransomware attack couldn't have come at a worse time for Mizuno as they just launched their Mizuno Pro 221, 223, and 225 golf irons on February 3rd, which were preordered and eagerly anticipated by many customers.

Due to this, customers who preordered the irons have been facing delays with no way to contact the company for more information.

The IT outages are also affecting Mizuno resellers who can no longer access Mizuno's 'Direct Connect' B2B website used by resellers to place orders.

Mizuno remains silent

As for Mizuno, they have been tight-lipped regarding the whole incident, not providing a public statement about what is causing their week-long outages or responding to multiple queries sent by BleepingComputer about the attack.

At this time, it is unknown what ransomware gang is behind the attack, but if the company does not pay a ransom, we will likely learn at a later date if the hackers publish stolen data.

This week has been bad for the sports industry, with the [San Francisco 49ers confirming yesterday they suffered a ransomware attack](#) by the BlackByte ransomware operation.

While details of the 49ers attack have not been disclosed, the threat actors have already started to leak invoices that they claim were stolen during the attack,

BleepingComputer will continue to try and contact Mizuno for more information and will update the story if we receive a response.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Ukraine: 'massive wave of hybrid warfare'
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/ukraine-says-it-s-targeted-by-massive-wave-of-hybrid-warfare-/
GIST	<p>The Security Service of Ukraine (SSU) today said the country is the target of an ongoing "wave of hybrid warfare," aiming to instill anxiety and undermine Ukrainian society's confidence in the state's ability to defend its citizens.</p> <p>"Ukraine is facing attempts to systemically sow panic, spread fake information and distort the real state of affairs. All this combined is nothing more than another massive wave of hybrid warfare," the SSU said.</p>

The SSU added that it had to counteract multiple such attempts linked to hostile intelligence agencies and bot farms targeting both social networks and mass media.

"The SSU is seeing such manifestations of hybrid warfare in social networks, some mass media, in the spread of narratives of the aggressor state by certain politicians, etc. The SSU is not just observing these, but also actively counteracting to them," the Ukrainian Security Service [added](#).

"This is reflected in the NSDC decisions, number of neutralized cyberattacks, dismantling of numerous bot farms, exposing agent networks of hostile intelligence services and preventing sabotage and terrorist attacks."

For instance, last week, the Ukrainian government security agency [dismantled two bot farms linked to Russian special services](#) and controlling 18,000 social network accounts.

The two botnets were used to distribute fake news that would spread panic and send bomb threats designed to disrupt operations across the country.

On February 1st, the Ukrainian Computer Emergency Response Team also [warned of attacks](#) against Ukrainian authorities, coordinated by the Gamaredon hacking group (previously linked to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) by [the Ukrainian security \(SSU\) and secret \(SBU\) services](#)).

One day later, the SSU said it [blocked over 120 cyberattacks](#) targeting the information systems of Ukrainian state institutions throughout January 2022.

Microsoft also said on February 4th that Gamaredon is the threat group behind a [wave of spear-phishing emails targeting Ukrainian entities](#) and organizations related to Ukrainian affairs since at least October 2021.

Redmond security and threat researchers added that Gamaredon's ongoing cyber-espionage campaign is coordinated out of Crimea, confirming SSU's assessment that these state-backed hackers are officers of the Crimean FSB known to have sided with the Russian occupation during the 2014 occupation.

However, as Microsoft pointed out, Gamaredon is not linked with the January cyberattacks that [targeted Ukraine's government agencies and corporate entities](#) with destructive data-wiping malware disguised as ransomware.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Addresses Australia govt. database leaked
SOURCE	https://www.9news.com.au/national/nsw-news-data-leak-shouldnt-have-happened-premier-dominic-perrottet-says/15ffb2eac-1a37-4803-9ffe-4e6f419e24eb?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>New South Wales Premier Dominic Perrottet has admitted the leak of more than 500,000 addresses, including Defence sites, a missile maintenance unit and domestic violence shelters through a government website "shouldn't have happened".</p> <p>The hundreds of thousands of locations were collected by the NSW Customer Services Department through its QR code registration system and made public through a government website.</p> <p>The locations, seen in a dataset obtained by 9News, were businesses or organisations which registered as wanting to comply by COVID-Safe directions.</p> <p>"If there has been, as it appears on its face, to have been a significant breach, then relevant state government department must be prosecuted," civil libertarian Terry O'Gorman said.</p>

The addresses of dozens of shelters and crisis accommodation centres for women across NSW were also made public, leading to one victims' support advocate claiming "it could be a matter of life and death".

"If government is really sharing information like this, it can have serious consequences," Full Stop Australia CEO Hayley Foster said.

The list also included correctional facilities and critical infrastructure networks, including power stations and tunnel entry sites.

Locations in Western Australia, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and the ACT were also included in the NSW database.

The NSW Government said it referred the matter to the Privacy Commissioner in October last year and was told "the incident did not constitute a privacy breach".

Mr Perrottet said he was advised of "an issue" this morning and said information had been "uploaded in error".

"That was worked through Privacy Commissioner. My understanding is they were satisfied that the matter was resolved and that information was taken down. It shouldn't have happened," Mr Perrottet said.

The NSW Department of Customer services said it classed less than one per cent of the 566,318 locations as sensitive.

"These businesses were all contacted by telephone and letter. No issues of concern were raised by any recipients," a department spokesperson said.

A notice on the NSW data website dated October 12, 2021 says: "The COVID Safe Businesses and Organisations dataset has been discontinued. We have identified issues with integrity of the data".

But neither the department nor the government explained what the "integrity" issue was.

Today, a department spokesperson said it "considers the security and privacy of customer information its highest priority".

Registration as a COVID-Safe business was open to all businesses, including those in other states and territories which had interests in NSW.

Whistleblower Skeeve Stevens, a technology specialist in the security and intelligence space, identified the publicly available data in September and said he alerted cyber experts, who in turn raised the alarm with the NSW Government.

"If the wrong people got hold of this it could've been used for bad things," Mr Stevens said.

"Some of the scary things we were searching - firearms, armoury, federal police and where storage locations were - perhaps someone should've thought about what should and shouldn't have been disclosed."

Mr O'Gorman questioned the need for the public database.

"Why did they make this information available in the first place? It just boggles the mind as to why there's even a necessity to publish this sort of information," he said.

The department spokesperson said: "The list of COVID-Safe businesses was publicly available online to ensure customers could plan activities while remaining COVID-Safe.

	"Those registering were advised the Department of Customer Service may share de-identified information for research and statistical purposes."
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HEADLINE	02/15 Report: rise of the super malicious insider
SOURCE	https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/02/15/super-malicious-insider-rise/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>DTEX Systems announced the release of a report which identifies a significant increase in industrial espionage incidents and the rise of the super malicious insider persona, and provides evidence that the abrupt shift to remote work has directly contributed to an escalation in psychosocial human behaviors that create organizational risk.</p> <p>The rise of malicious insider incidents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The super malicious insider accounted for 32% of malicious insider incidents investigated in 2021 • 72% year-over-year increase in actionable insider threat incidents • 42% of actionable incidents were related to IP and data theft, including industrial espionage incidents related to the theft of trade secrets, source code, and active collusion with a foreign nexus • 75% of insider threat criminal prosecutions were the result of remote workers • 56% of organizations had an insider data theft incident resulting from employees leaving or joining companies • +200% year-over-year increase in data loss associated with users taking screenshots during confidential Zoom and Microsoft Teams meetings, and • +300% year-over-year increase in employees utilizing corporate assets for non-work activities. <p>For more than a decade, insider threats have been categorized as either malicious, negligent or compromised. Based on the findings, a fourth persona has emerged—the super malicious insider. The super malicious insider is a technically proficient employee who is acutely aware of an organization’s cyber security architecture, solutions, and processes and who understands both the technical and human analyst limitations in detecting insider threat indicators.</p> <p>Sophisticated insider techniques increasing dramatically</p> <p>Investigations found a dramatic increase (32%) in the use of sophisticated insider techniques across the insider incidents they studied, including a 43% increase in the usage of burner email accounts, a noticeable increase in the use of OSINT practices to conceal identity, and the active avoidance (96%) of techniques known in the MITRE ATT&CK framework.</p> <p>“If any company thinks they don’t have an insider risk problem, they aren’t looking,” said Rajan Koo, Chief Customer Officer and DTEX Lead with DTEX Systems. “The addition of the super malicious persona in this year’s report provides a wake-up call that traditional cyber security tools, such as DLP, UBA, and UAM, are actively being avoided or circumvented by those with sufficient technical skill and malicious intent.”</p> <p>“While the increase in the amount and impact of insider risk occurred across industries, we found that it is most concentrated in technology and critical infrastructure at 33% and 24%, respectively,” said Armaan Mahbod, Director of Security and Business Intelligence, Counter-Insider Threat at DTEX. “The risk to critical infrastructure entities in the Five Eyes nations is especially significant as any compromise can be damaging to the national security of these countries and the safety and well-being of its citizens.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Hacker exposes donors to convoy protest
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/14/foreign-money-funding-extremism-in-canada-says-hacker
GIST	A hacker who leaked the names and locations of more than 90,000 people who donated money to the Canadian trucker convoy protest has said it exposed how money from abroad had funded “extremism” in the country.

In an exclusive interview, the hacker told the Guardian that Canada was “not safe from foreign political manipulation”.

“You see a huge amount of money that isn’t even coming from Canada – that’s plain as day,” said the hacker, who belongs to the hacktivist group [Anonymous](#).

The leaked data showed that more than 90,000 donations were made via GiveSendGo, with most funds appearing to come from [Canada](#) and the US. According to the data, individuals in countries including the UK, the Netherlands, Ireland and Denmark also donated.

Amarnath Amarasingam, a professor at Canada’s Queens University and an expert in extremism and social movements, [tweeted](#) that of the 92,844 donations, “51,666 (56%) came from the US, 36,202 (29%) came from Canada, and 1,831 (2%) came from the UK.” US-based donations totalled US\$3.62m, while Canadians donated US\$4.31m, he added.

The hacker said the sizeable number of donations coming from Canada showed that some people in the country had fallen into step with what they saw as American-style extremism.

“Up here in Canada, we kind of lied to ourselves,” the hacker said. “[We were saying] ‘It couldn’t happen here, there’s no way it could happen, we are better.’ And now people are kind of faced with the reality that no, actually, we have much more in common with our neighbours to the south than we wanted to admit to ourselves.”

The data shows that about a dozen donors used .gov email addresses in association with donations, indicating that some money came from government employees in the US. These included accounts from the US Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security, Nasa, the Federal Bureau of Prisons and a state transit corporation. The data also contained one Canadian government email address.

When asked what the leak meant to the public, the hacker said: “If you are doing some fascism and domestic extremism kinds of movements ... [then] you are not going to have a good time, because hacktivists have been focusing more and more and more on countering domestic extremism, because we are fucking pissed.”

On Sunday, GiveSendGo’s web domain was redirected to a page featuring a video clip of the animated film Frozen with a message to convoy supporters. “Attention, GiveSendGo grifters and hatriots,” it read. “You helped fund the [January 6 insurrection in the US](#), you helped fund an insurrection in Ottawa. In fact, you are committed to funding anything that keeps the raging fire of misinformation going until that [sic] it burns the world’s collective democracies down.

“On behalf of sane people worldwide who wish to continue living in a democracy, I am now telling you that GiveSendGo itself is frozen.”

GiveSendGo became the main site for donations after another crowdfunding platform, GoFundMe, blocked money transfers.

On Monday, although the hackers’ message no longer appeared on the landing page of GiveSendGo, the site [remained down](#).

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HEADLINE	02/14 ‘Freedom convoy’ crowdfunding site offline
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/crowdfunding-site-for-canadian-freedom-convoy-disabled-in-possible-hack/
GIST	The fundraising website used to raise millions of dollars for a trucker-led “Freedom Convoy” protest against coronavirus restrictions in Canada is offline after reports of a possible hack that exposed donor information.

On Monday, a screenshot of the GiveSendGo site featured an image from the Disney film “Frozen,” along with a ticker purporting to show the names, donation amounts and email addresses of people who helped support the cause. The image bore the words “GiveSendGo is now frozen,” along with a link describing raw donation data.

A video captured by Canadian Broadcasting Corp. News reporter Travis Dhanraj shows scrolling text addressed to “GiveSendGo Grifters and Hatriots.”

“GiveSendGo has a history of providing a platform for individuals and organized groups to fund hate groups, promote disinformation and insurrection disguised as ‘protests,’” the video text read, an apparent reference to the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. “Most of their larger campaigns are, in some way, a continuing threat to democracy.”

That image was later replaced with a page stating: “We are currently offline for maintenance and server upgrades. We are continuing to improve our platform to ensure it will be the best fundraising platform on the internet.” GiveSendGo founder Jacob Wells did not respond to requests for comment.

It’s unclear who might be responsible for the apparent hack, which the company has yet to confirm. GiveSendGo said on Feb. 5 that it had been targeted by online attacks.

But text in the video tweeted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. reporter offered to provide journalists and researchers with the data in its entirety “so that the impact of foreign political interference can be better understood and sensible, informed policy decisions can be made to defend against this growing threat.”

A separate post on the news leak website Distributed Denial of Secrets said it will make Freedom Convoy donor information available solely to journalists and researchers, including self-reported names, addresses, Zip codes, and IP addresses from the GiveSendGo platform as of Feb. 13. It offered 30 megabytes of information.

The GiveSendGo website has sparked concerns that foreign donors could be fueling demonstrations in Canada, where protests over coronavirus vaccine mandates for cross-border truckers have morphed into a broader movement against pandemic restrictions.

On Sunday, Ottawa declared a state of emergency as protesters blocked off streets and blared horns. Local police reported that 1,000 vehicles, 5,000 protesters and at least 300 counterprotesters had clogged city streets.

An Ontario court on Friday ordered demonstrators to end their blockade of a key bridge connecting Canada with the United States. Many protesters defied the order to suspend what local authorities have called a “siege” and “illegal occupation” by the Friday night deadline. The protests have caused manufacturers on both sides of the crossing to curtail operations.

U.S. automakers Ford and General Motors said they have cut production and canceled shifts at some sites, while a representative for Canadian carmakers told an Ontario court that the economic toll was nearly \$40 million per day.

Earlier this month, the crowdfunding site GoFundMe said it had removed a fundraiser supporting the convoy because it violated its terms of service, but an initial \$1 million had already been distributed. Donors then flocked to GiveSendGo, contributing close to \$9 million, Wells said on Fox News Sunday.

“People are vowing to never use GoFundMe again because of the ideological stances they’re taking,” Wells said. “We take a neutral position. We allow people to fundraise, period.”

Wells said money has been transferred to protest organizers in Canada from fundraising accounts linked on the site. He said his company is looking at “a wide variety of options” to get funding to them despite the court order there.

A review by The Washington Post showed that the self-described Christian website has become a refuge of sorts for outcasts and extremists, including fringe groups such as the Proud Boys and conspiracy theorists who seek to undercut the results of the 2020 election by promoting debunked claims of fraud. Some of the users claim to have been booted from other crowdfunding websites for violating terms of service.

Amarnath Amarasingam, a professor who studies religious political movements at Queen’s University in Ontario, said GiveSendGo has become the “go-to platform” for people who think their fundraising campaigns are going to be taken down. “Similar to what Gab or Parler became for online content,” Amarasingam said in an interview.

It garnered widespread publicity after raising funds for Kyle Rittenhouse, Amarasingam said. The teen was acquitted in November of all charges related to the 2020 shootings in Kenosha, Wisconsin, that left two men dead and another wounded. The case set off national debates about guns, race, vigilantism and self-defense.

Other fundraising campaigns raised money for travel expenses, body armor and other financial assistance connected to “Stop the Steal” events, including the Jan. 6 rally in Washington that turned into a bloody attack on the U.S. Capitol.

The hack could play into concerns that international funders are contributing to a Canadian domestic dispute. Amarasingam said he conducted an initial analysis of the purported donor data and found that 56% of the more than 92,840 donors report U.S. Zip codes and 29% reported Canadian Zip codes. He emphasized, though, that the database has not been authenticated, and individually submitted Zip codes could be incorrect even if the data set came from GiveSendGo.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Mystery: whereabouts of ‘White Widow’
SOURCE	https://www.mylondon.news/news/zone-1-news/mystery-over-whereabouts-white-widow-23097728
GIST	<p>10 years ago British jihadist Samantha Lewthwaite disappeared following claims that she had been the centre of planning multiple terrorist attacks. She was infamously named the White Widow. The sinister nickname originated from the death of her husband- London 7/7 bomber Germaine Lindsay.</p> <p>All that's known about the woman is that evaded UK security services and fled to Africa. It is here that she was then linked to scores of atrocities from 2012. The mum of four, who turns 40 next year, was rarely out of the news as an alleged al-Shabaab operative. Now, things have gone quiet and her family have no idea where she is.</p> <p>Security analysts have told the Mirror that she is probably being sheltered at a remote location in Somalia or Tanzania, unable to travel from her hiding place for fear of being killed. The other alternative is that she is dead.</p> <p>This is her family's fear and Lewthwaite’s uncle, Nigel, brother of her dad Andrew, said: “As far as I know my brother’s not heard anything from her since way back. I don’t know how long it’s been. She’s probably dead, but they’re not saying anything,” reports the Mirror.</p>

Asked if the family had received any information from the police or security services, Mr Lewthwaite shook his head. He added: "It's hard. It's been 10 years, probably longer than that, but what do we do? I think the last time I saw her was on the night of her school prom. I saw her at Aylesbury station."

In 2017, an al-Shabaab courier was caught with 15 fake South African passports destined for extremists including Lewthwaite in Tanzania. This is the last she has been heard of. Terrorism experts are sceptical over claims of alleged sightings of the fugitive in Yemen, Syria, and even on Ukraine's border with Russia. The Crisis Group's senior analyst for Somalia, Omar Mahmood, said she is now unlikely to be active as an al-Shabaab jihadist.

He told the Mirror: "I find it difficult to believe she is out there operating at a high level of the organisation. It's become increasingly insular. There's definitely a degree of legend in her story. I haven't seen anything over the past few years that would attest to her involvement, or her being around much. If she's on good terms within the organisation, then she could be living in one of the larger towns and villages that al-Shabaab occupies. It would be difficult for her to blend in and maintain some level of concealment for a long period, especially if she were moving about. Any sort of movement would - definitely expose her to some risks."

King's College London radicalisation expert Dr Gina Vale said she would expect Lewthwaite to be used as a PR asset if directly involved in al-Shabaab attacks. The senior research fellow added: "Her whole identity, the way it's been constructed, the link to Germaine Lindsay, the White Widow moniker, the fact she's a Western Muslim convert, she's white and a woman... all of these things put together make her a very lucrative propaganda tool, which hasn't been exploited.

"And that's what's so fascinating about her case. She remains a great mystery. To have someone of her profile and to not use that more actively within propaganda is really unusual. I would have thought if she had been involved in perpetrating attacks, we would have heard more about it from the group itself. I think it would be very difficult for her to be a frontline operative, but that doesn't negate that she could still have other supporting roles within attack planning or financing. These are ways for someone of her profile to contribute to attacks without actually taking part in them."

After fleeing Britain, Lewthwaite was accused by Kenyan police in February 2012 of plotting terror attacks on tourist hotels in the country. She had travelled there on a fraudulent passport, stealing the identity of a nurse, and co-ordinated an al-Shabaab cell from a safehouse in Mombasa which was raided. Lewthwaite also reportedly launched a rocket-propelled grenade at football supporters in a bar in coastal city.

The fate of her children, three of whom were born in Britain, is also shrouded in mystery. Former soldier Andrew, who served in Northern Ireland, and his estranged wife Christine, know nothing of her youngest two, Abdur-Rahman, 13, and 11-year-old Surajah. They were from a relationship with London-born terrorist Habib Saleh Ghani, believed to have been killed in an ambush Somalia in 2013.

Her children by Lindsay – Abdullah, 17, and 16-year-old Ruqayyah, born a month after the London bombings – have the middle names Shaheed and Shahidah. They are male and female forms of the word martyr. Most of the Lewthwaite family still live in Aylesbury, but have no desire to talk about the terrorism allegations encircling Samantha.

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HEADLINE	02/14 UK: years of messages--bomber, recruiter
SOURCE	https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/police-held-messages-between-manchester-23092487
GIST	More than 1,000 messages between a 'Salman' and a now-convicted terrorist recruiter were discovered by police in 2014 in a counter-terror operation, but the person wasn't identified as bomber Salman Abedi until after he murdered 22 people at Manchester Arena in 2017, the public inquiry into the atrocity was told.

Some exchanges between Abedi and Abdalraouf Abdallah were 'capable' of revealing Abedi's extremist mindset, [the inquiry heard on Monday](#).

Abedi sent 'selfie' images of himself to Abdallah in mobile phone messages, others referenced his full name and there was also a video of him.

But the information was not highlighted to a counter-terror policing intelligence unit, the inquiry heard.

The detective who led the 2014 probe agreed the 'Salman messages' should have been 'lifted out' of that operation for separate 'intelligence development'.

Paul Greaney QC, counsel to the inquiry, asked retired GMP Detective Inspector Frank Morris: "Do you agree, not with the benefit of hindsight, that where you have a person communicating with someone you believe to be a terrorist who is expressing a similar extremist mindset to them, that something should be done at the very least to find out who they are?"

"Yes," replied Mr Morris.

Mr Morris said 'it would not have been the hardest thing to do to find out his real identity' and agreed that had Abedi been identified, the link would have been available to law enforcement agencies.

A Prevent referral could have been considered and Abedi could 'possibly' have been interviewed, he added, but there was no 'intelligence submission' made to the 'operations intelligence management unit' which ran alongside the 2014 terror investigation.

The inquiry has already heard that in the July - four months before police found the messages - Abedi was 'closed' by MI5 as a subject of interest.

Inquiry chairman Sir John Saunders said he would reach a conclusion over whether a Greater Manchester Police intelligence unit 'should have found things out which they didn't'.

The exchanges were recovered from a mobile phone seized from Abdallah in November, 2014.

He was convicted of assisting others in committing acts of terrorism by facilitating travel to Syria and jailed in May 2016 for nine-and-a-half years.

In 2014 under Operation Oliban, police were investigating several men suspected of travelling to Syria for extremist activity who held allegiance to Islamic State, the inquiry heard.

The 'supportive mindset evidence' used in the subsequent prosecution of Abdallah was referenced at the public inquiry on Monday.

Mr Greaney said between November 5 and 28, 2014, there were around 1,300 contacts between them - more than 40 a day.

One objective of Operation Oliban was to identify any 'like-minded associates who may share extremist views or aspirations'.

Temporary Detective Inspector Paul Costello, giving evidence, said there was a wider intelligence team in the background assessing information gathered regarding other individuals who emerged as part of Oliban. He accepted there was 'regular contact' between 'Salman' and Abdallah - and there were 'aspects of the communication that caused me concern in terms of his mindset'.

Abedi, on November 12, 2014, sent Abdallah a You Tube clip of an Islamic chant saying: "Oh the soldiers of sacrifice advance forward. Prepare the young men for the day of the call. Restore authority back to the rightness and crush the stronghold of the enemies' soldiers."

He also described non-Muslims as 'dogs' and 'Khuffars'.

The contact was saved as 'Salman' in Abdallah's phone and the number being used ended 3458.

On November 18, a further conversation referenced 'martyrdom'. Abedi said in one message: "Allah willing, the real meeting would be on the Resurrection Day."

TDI Costello said he believed the messages to mean Abedi was 'praying for Abdalraouf's intention to become martyr himself'.

Sir John asked him whether he was thinking 'I think we need to be finding out who this Salman is and investigate him?'

Abedi, said TDI Costello, in one message sent a picture of a Dinar coin minted by ISIS - and called the group 'terrorists'.

And in another message, the inquiry heard Abedi told Abdallah to 'leave it' and that he was 'going too far'. TDI Costello said Abdallah didn't engage Abedi to go to Syria to fight - and Abedi made no reference that he wanted to do that.

"There was reassurance to me that that would be further looked at elsewhere from an intelligence perspective," said TDI Costello of the 'Salman' messages.

"The messages were there... for others to make an assessment on what else those messages could mean." In 2015, there was information held by the phone company linking the 3458 number to Salman Abedi, the inquiry was also told.

"There was enough information within the device, alongside with some modest police investigation methods, that could have identified Salman Abedi as the user of that phone at that time, yes," said TDI Costello.

Mr Morris said: "There's nothing extraordinary in these text exchanges that we did not see in other operations.

"It went to the Crown Prosecution Service, they did not ask. Nobody ever asked who this Salman was. "So with hindsight, of course it [the messages] should have been put in, but at the time I did not think it should have been."

He added that 'four or five people', including detectives, intelligence analysts and himself, were aware of the information but did not flag it up for further inquiries.

John Cooper QC, for a number of the bereaved families, said they do not know how it was processed, who was responsible, 'what steps were taken' and 'what they did with it' in terms of the information.

Mr Greaney said: "That unit did not identify that the 3458 number related to Salman Abedi. That discovery was only made after the Arena attack."

TDI Costello said he would have expected anything found to be relevant to Operation Oliban in terms of the Salman messages to be 'fed back' to him.

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HEADLINE	02/15 France signals intention pull out of Mali
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/15/france-mali-troops/
GIST	DAKAR, Senegal — France and Mali had been trading blows for months when the European power's top diplomat apparently lobbed one insult too many.

The West African nation's military rulers are "illegitimate" and "out of control," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said in late January as reports multiplied about Russian mercenaries operating on Malian soil. Days later, Mali gave the ambassador from Paris — its biggest wartime ally — 72 hours to leave the country.

Now France could pull its thousands of troops from Mali, Le Drian said late Monday — a move that would upend the international fight against extremist groups spreading across West Africa. "If the conditions are no longer in place so that we can act in Mali — which is clearly the case — then we will continue to fight terrorism next door," the French official told France 5.

An announcement from French President Emmanuel Macron is expected as early as this week, two officials with knowledge of the matter told The Washington Post.

"We will reorganize to ensure the fight against terrorism continues," Le Drian said on the broadcast.

France sent troops to Mali in 2013 to stop al-Qaeda-linked militants from storming the capital, Bamako, after the fighters had seized cities in the north, including storied Timbuktu. After that successful mission, French flags draped over balconies as people cheered on the foreign soldiers.

But over the last decade, the extremists regrouped and drilled further into Mali's countryside while spilling into neighboring countries. Malians wondered why the French forces in West Africa — which stood at 5,100 last year — couldn't stop the menace. Some blamed the former colonial power for making it worse.

Thousands of West Africans have died and millions have lost their homes as fighters who claim adherence to the extremist al-Qaeda and the Islamic State groups grabbed more territory. Analysts describe it as one of the fastest-growing insurgencies in the world.

By October 2021, a survey from Malian statistician Sadiki Guindo found that only 26.1 percent of Bamako residents had a "favorable" opinion of France, while 88 percent said they liked Russia. Earlier this month, video showed protesters in the capital burning cardboard cutouts of the French president.

"We don't want the French here," said Yacoube Sangare, a 66-year-old village council member in a region south of Bamako. He was 4-years-old when Mali asserted its independence from France. His parents recalled being treated as subjects.

Simmering resentments have burst into rage, he said. People can't travel far north of Bamako without risking their lives — extremists plant bombs in the roads — and with swaths of farmland cut off, it's hard for to put food on the table.

"We blame France for this, and our past leaders for working with them," Sangare said. "We're ready for them to leave today."

The French military footprint in Mali isn't beloved in Paris, either: One columnist for the center-left Le Monde newspaper called the situation a "diplomatic and military humiliation."

"Nine years after its start, the mission in Mali has failed to achieve any of its objectives — to ensure Mali's integrity and restore the state there, defeat the jihadists and prevent their proliferation in West Africa," columnist Philippe Bernard wrote.

The Élysée has so far not confirmed reports that a withdrawal from Mali could be imminently decided.

Last spring, Mali counted its second coup d'état in nine months and a special forces officer, Col. Assimi Goïta, put himself in charge of the nation of 21 million. Macron condemned the takeover. Three weeks later, Paris announced a gradual withdrawal of troops from West Africa.

France's 5,100 troops were focused on curbing the extremist threat in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. By February, about 4,000 remained. The Élysée had initially planned to reduce the number to about 2,500 over the next year.

A European counterterrorism force called Takuba was supposed to pick up the slack. Now that effort is also at risk: Nearly half of the 800 soldiers deployed are French, and Mali kicked out 100 Danish soldiers that had arrived last month at France's invitation, citing a lack of paperwork. (Sweden also said it would withdraw troops from Takuba.)

European allies have blasted the late December arrival of "hundreds" of Russian mercenaries. The deployment of such private contractors to Mali "can only further deteriorate the security situation in West Africa," France and 14 other Western powers said in a joint statement. Russian mercenaries, which have been hired in several African nations, have a track record of human rights abuses, according to a panel of U.N. experts, including extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances and sexual assault.

Mali's government has denied working with mercenaries, saying that only Russian trainers — "state-to-state" allies — are active in the country. Previously, officials said they courted Moscow's help because France was leaving.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin has contradicted that claim, saying at a news conference with Macron this month that the Kremlin had "nothing to do" with "private" security contractors in Mali.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Covid pandemic little impact on terrorism
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/activity-shows-terror-groups-and-extremists-were-undeterred-by-covid-19-pandemic/
GIST	<p>Now in its third year, the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the world population with 350 million confirmed cases, more than 5.6 million deaths (as of February 9, 2022), and widespread geopolitical and socioeconomic disruptions. Government leaders have prioritized the implementation of mitigation measures – including vaccines, booster shots, masking, social distancing, and drug therapies – yet the prospect of new variants arising remains an ongoing threat. The pandemic also has prompted many people to change how they live and work and some to carry on as usual, while still others have used the pandemic to their advantage. Organized crime groups, for example, have found ways to thrive during the pandemic by ramping up human trafficking and antiquities trafficking. The World 2020 Drug Report and the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime have underlined how drug trafficking groups and various criminal organizations have taken advantage of the consequences COVID-19 and expanded their capacities.</p> <p>Much less is known, however, about any changes in the activity level of terrorist organizations during the pandemic. Scant research has been done on the topic. One such study, which used 2019 data from the Global Terrorism Database, found a tremendous decrease in the number of terrorist attacks in urban areas and a slight increase in terrorist activity in conflict zones. An examination of data in the U.S. State Department's 2020 Annex of Statistical Information, published in December 2021, indicated a 13 percent increase in the total number of terrorist attacks across all countries between 2019 and 2020, which could lead one to conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic has little to no impact on terrorism.</p> <p>How individual countries fare in terms of the effect of COVID-19 on terrorist activity is problematic. The reliability of COVID-19 data varies from one country to another. The Western world, for example, is believed to have the most known cases, primarily because of widespread testing and transparency in the release of COVID-19 data. Some countries lack testing, making it difficult to get a clear picture on the number of cases, while other countries manipulate the numbers to their advantage. Reported here are the results of a study that analyzed the impacts of COVID-19 by the types of terrorism included in the 2020 Annex of Statistical Information.</p> <p>Global Impacts of COVID-19</p>

COVID-19 and its variants are [among the most contagious viruses](#) that scientists have seen, fueling a pandemic that has had dramatic social and economic [impacts](#) unheard of until now. The decline in growth of the world Gross Domestic Product (GDP), for example, is the greatest it has been since the end of World War II. The global economy contracted 3.5 percent in 2020, and every country covered by the International Monetary Fund reported negative growth in 2020. Manufacturing countries were hit especially hard and recorded rapid declines in GDP. Lockdowns and quarantines led to fatigue among people unable to leave their homes to socialize or go to offices as they were accustomed to doing. Reports of mental health issues among people at all socioeconomic levels increased as people felt more and more isolated. At the same time, the number of COVID-19 cases increased worldwide, rising from around 66,000 on March 30, 2020, to around 300,000 on July 30, and to around 596,000 on December 30. When omicron became the dominant variant, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases skyrocketed.

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Terrorism

Terrorism continues to be a significant security issue worldwide. Efforts to stem the tide of terrorism have been met with some success, though the problem persists. The Western world, for example, has been able to counter several coordinated attacks by jihadist terrorist organizations on Western soil. At the same time, however, the rising number of ISIS- and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups operating in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa has threatened not only local and regional security but also global security. Added to the mix are Iranian-backed Shia groups that are active in the Middle East and Latin America; a growing number of organized right-wing extremist groups in the Western world, including those involved in the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol; antifascist and anarchist groups in the United States and Western world; and revolutionary and far-left groups that operate in Latin America and Asia. Some of these groups are listed among the [top 10 terrorist groups](#) responsible for the largest number of terrorism incidents in 2020, indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic had little effect on stemming the groups' collective activity.

Revolutionary Terrorism

Revolutionary terrorism is a global movement expressing dissatisfaction in the wake of anticolonialism and refers to movements designed to overthrow and replace a political system. Modern revolutionary terrorism reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s and involved mainly left-wing and Marxist movements. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) founded in 1964 and Shining Path founded in Peru in 1970 are two examples of revolutionary terrorism in Latin America, while the New People's Army (NPA) founded in 1968 in the Philippines and the communist and Maoist-oriented India-Naxalites founded in 1967 are two examples of revolutionary terrorism in Asia. Today, NPA and Naxalites are two active revolutionary groups.

Revolutionary groups have taken advantage of worsening economic conditions and weak government responses in the countries where they operate by telling their fighters that the government has presented more opportunities to wealthy people than to poor people. [In India](#), for example, a nationwide lockdown and local restrictions amid the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted workers and day laborers to leave large cities and return to their villages, driving up the unemployment rate and causing economic hardship for many. A common belief among the Naxals is that they have been hurt especially hard by the economic effects of the pandemic compared with the country's billionaires, who have managed to increase their wealth 35 percent during the nationwide lockdown. Sensing an opportunity, the Naxals have attempted to persuade the returning villagers to join the ranks of the India-Naxalites organization by promising them a better future. The effort was at least somewhat effective. The India-Naxalites slightly increased their capacity and perpetrated 298 attacks in 2020, which is close to the number of attacks the group perpetrated in 2019....

In the Philippines, a significant number of NPA fighters who surrendered or were captured by the Philippine military [tested positive](#) for COVID-19. According to military sources, COVID-19 spread quickly among the members of the NPA; therefore, the army launched a "[vaccine for surrender](#)" campaign for NPA fighters. The NPA was suspicious of the campaign's true intentions and warned its members not to join the military's vaccination campaign. Instead, the NPA carried on as usual, perpetrating enough attacks in 2020 to place the group [among the top 10](#) terrorist organizations in that category. Much like the India-Naxalites, the NPA increased its capacity slightly in 2020....

In [Colombia](#), the government ordered one of the longest and strictest COVID-19 lockdowns in the world; however, the measure has failed to contain the virus and, in 2020, Colombia was included among the countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases. The economic and social fallout from the spread of the virus provided fertile ground for revolutionary groups, such as FARC-dissident groups and the National Liberation Army, to recruit more children into their ranks. Social confinement and school closures made more children vulnerable to enticement by revolutionary groups. The efforts were successful. In the first half of 2020, for example, armed groups recruited 190 minors – a marked increase from the 200 minors recruited in all of 2019. For its part, the National Liberation Army has hosted parties used messaging apps to entice children into its ranks during the pandemic.

Right-Wing Extremism

Right-wing extremism is defined as the use of threats or intentional violence by non-state actors and individuals (often referred to as lone actors) with goals that include declaration of the superiority of one race and/or ethnicity over all other races and/or ethnicities, opposition to the government authority, anger at women, and outrage against single issues such as abortion, the environment, or animal rights. This type of terrorism manifests as racism, hatred of minorities, antisemitism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. More specifically, far-right groups in the United States typically express contempt for the federal government, emphasize social hierarchy, and are composed of white supremacists and anti-government extremists.

Right-wing extremism has received increased attention in the Western world. Although the European Union, the United States, and Canada have reported a handful of right-wing terrorist attacks, right-wing extremism has become a major security threat for these countries. The insurrection targeting the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, served as a galvanizing event and brought to the forefront concerns about how right-wing extremist groups can come together, make a plan, use social and digital media, and dare to attack one of the strongest symbols of democracy in the world. Parler, a conservative alternative to Twitter, played a key role in the ability of far-right groups to not only [plan](#) but also inspire and recruit thousands of like-minded people from across the country to come to Washington, D.C., and storm the Capitol on the day that a joint session of Congress was convened to certify Joe Biden as the winner of the Electoral College vote.

Far-right groups in the United States have been quite vocal in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of refusing to abide by efforts intended to mitigate the spread of the virus. These groups have [used](#) the COVID-19 pandemic to call for violence, spread debunked conspiracy theories, engage in hate speech, and claim that democracy is a failed system. Much like the January 6 insurrectionists, far-right groups use digital platforms to disseminate extremist content and call for coordinated campaigns against perceived enemies. The platforms of choice range from unregulated imageboard sites (such as 8chan and 4chan), to censorship-free discussion platforms (such as Voat), to encrypted messaging channels (such as Telegram). Incendiary content transmitted through these channels has triggered acts of violent extremism and shows how far-right groups can achieve their goals of attacking law enforcement, liberals, Muslims, Jews, Black Americans and others deemed to be their enemies. Telegram, for example, has seen an exponential increase in the number of Telegram channels associated with white supremacy and racism. The [Boogaloo movement](#), a “decentralized ideological network that believes in a coming second U.S. civil war and espouses anti-government and anti-law enforcement rhetoric,” has [grown 800 percent](#) just in the month of March 2020. QAnon, which the FBI labeled as a [domestic terrorism threat](#) in 2019, espouses an [ideology](#) based on the belief that the United States and the rest of the world are controlled by a “powerful group of pedophiles who worship Satan and control the Democratic Party, the media, and Hollywood.” The number of QAnon followers on Telegram increased almost 100 percent in March 2020.

The words and actions of far-right groups have pushed the U.S. Department of Justice to release a [memorandum](#) that refers to coronavirus as a “biological agent” and charges certain acts related to COVID-19 as federal crimes of terrorism. The memorandum aims to punish ill-intentioned individuals who seek to spread the virus to others and violate social-distance guidelines. The politicians who are influential among far-right groups have made the situation worse. For example, after former U.S. President Donald Trump labeled coronavirus as the “[Chinese virus](#)” in 2020, online [anti-Asian hate speech](#) and physical [attacks](#) on Asian Americans increased.

The situation in the European Union was similar, with the number of arrests of right-wing extremists [increasing](#) in 2020 compared with 2019. For example, the number of total arrests rose from 21 in 2019 to 34 in 2020. Germany was the leading country with 14 arrests in 2020 compared with no arrests in 2019. The Netherlands recorded 6 arrests in 2020 compared with 2 arrests in 2019.

The author's database confirmed the increases in the number of attacks by right-wing groups. The database collected information on attacks by lone actors according to their chosen ideology (i.e., right wing, jihadist, ethnonationalist, and anarchist) and whose acts meet the criteria for individually committed violence. Accordingly, the number of right-wing attacks worldwide rose from 15 in 2019 to 27 in 2020.

Jihadist Terrorism

Jihadist groups are influenced by their strict interpretation of the Qur'an and their twisted version of Islamic law. They use religious rhetoric not only to justify their goals but also to assert that the coronavirus is a punishment from God. The groups have devoted an enormous amount of their attention to the COVID-19 pandemic, generating propaganda based on their beliefs and even encouraging their followers in some countries to intentionally spread the virus. This heightened focus on the pandemic, however, did not diminish the groups' desire or ability to carry out terrorist attacks. For jihadist groups, it was business as usual.

As the 2020 [Annex of Statistical Information](#) shows, COVID-19 did not reduce significantly the attack capacity of jihadist groups in 2020. The Taliban, Boko Haram, ISIS-Core, and two groups affiliated with al-Qaeda (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria and al-Shabaab in Somalia) perpetrated almost the same number of attacks in 2020 as they did in 2019 (see Figure 3). ISIS-Core's province in the Democratic Republic of Congo (ISIS-DRC) was the outlier; attacks by this group increased almost 300 percent in 2020 compared with 2019, despite the impacts of COVID-19.

According to [ISIS-Core](#), the pandemic has been "God's wrath upon the West, and the disease itself is a 'soldier of Allah.'" In its official online publication, *al-Naba*, ISIS states that the pandemic has killed more Americans than the attacks of 9/11, which shows that America is not powerful and invincible. In another ISIS online publication in India, the group [called](#) for its supporters to spread the virus, saying that every member of the organization and their families can contribute to Allah's cause by becoming the carriers and that it is guaranteed that devout Muslims will not be sickened because no disease can harm even a hair of a believer.

Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups are no different from ISIS in their responses to COVID-19. For example, the Turkestan Islamic Party, a Uyghur jihadist group operating in Syria, [claimed](#) that the outbreak of COVID-19 in China was a punishment from Allah for the Chinese oppression of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang. Another al-Qaeda-affiliated group, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, calls the virus an apocalyptic harbinger that will cause political and economic collapse and provide a geopolitical opportunity for their aims. At the same time, HTS released on its media outlet, *al-Ebaa*, a [poster](#) that instructed the group's followers to comply with COVID-19 mitigation and safety measures in the territories under its control.

Furthermore, al-Shabaab used conspiracy theories in its approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, saying that crusader forces intentionally spread the virus in Somalia. It should be noted that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran, which was designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department in 2019, claimed that the virus is the result of a Zionist biological terror attack.

The Taliban said that God sent COVID-19 in response to the sins and disobedience of mankind, though the group [hinted](#) that it was concerned about the reckless spread of the virus in government prisons where Taliban militants were being held. The Taliban also issued security guidelines intended to counter the spread of the virus and asked that more tests be made available throughout Afghanistan.

Despite the jihadist groups' expressed or implied concerns about the virus, they proceeded with business as usual during the pandemic by increasing their presence on social media to radicalize and recruit into their ranks as many people as possible. At the same time, two of the jihadist groups – the Taliban and HTS

– exploited the pandemic operationally by providing government services and medical aid to locals. Using a hearts-and-minds approach, both groups sought to improve their credibility and popularity and show that they are better prepared to meet the challenges of COVID-19 than the government officials in the countries where two group operate.

Conclusion

To conclude, the 2020 Annex of Statistical Information shows that COVID-19 did not reduce the number of terrorist attacks; instead, such attacks increased 13 percent worldwide. Terrorist organizations continued to maintain their operational capacity and responded to the virus based on the pillars of their ideologies. Whereas jihadist groups used their religious ideology to justify their causes and benefit from the impacts of the pandemic by declaring that the virus is a punishment from God, right-wing groups in the United States used digital platforms to spread debunked conspiracy theories and target their perceived enemies. Revolutionary groups were more concerned about the economic impact of the virus and weak or ineffective government responses to the disease. Pandemics – regardless of the precipitating disease –have significant negative impacts on the social, political, and economic systems of the affected countries. Immune to these effects appear to be terrorist organizations and right-wing extremist groups. They simply carry on, business as usual.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Pakistan allows India deliver wheat to Kabul
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/pakistan-india-deliver-wheat-struggling-kabul-82875294
GIST	<p>ISLAMABAD -- Pakistan is allowing nuclear rival India to deliver tons of wheat to Afghans struggling through intensifying food shortages, two Foreign Ministry officials said Monday.</p> <p>Under a deal with New Delhi, dozens of trucks from Afghanistan will be allowed to collect wheat from India by way of Pakistan's Wagha border near the city of Lahore, beginning Feb. 21. The trucks filled with wheat will then head back to Afghanistan's Jalalabad city via Pakistan's Torkham border the next day, the officials said.</p> <p>They spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to media on the record.</p> <p>The arrangement comes more than three months after India announced it would deliver 50,000 metric tons of wheat and life-saving medicine to Afghanistan.</p> <p>Pakistan said at the time it would allow the Indian aid to pass through its territory en route to Afghanistan, but New Delhi could not finalize modalities until last week, said the officials.</p> <p>Pakistan and India have a history of bitter relations. Ties between them were further strained after deadly attacks in India's section of the disputed territory of Kashmir three years ago. More than 40 Indian soldiers were killed. New Delhi blamed Pakistan-based militants for the attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir, a charge Pakistan denied, demanding evidence.</p> <p>Pakistan suspended trade with India in 2019 after New Delhi stripped the Indian-controlled section of Kashmir of its statehood and special constitutional status. Since then, normal diplomatic and trade ties between them have not resumed.</p> <p>Pakistan now says it is allowing India to deliver food to Kabul through its territory under a special arrangement.</p> <p>Afghanistan's economy is teetering on the brink of collapse in the wake of the Taliban takeover in August.</p> <p>Also on Monday, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in a meeting with visiting Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi stressed the need for urgent action by the international community "to prevent a humanitarian crisis and economic meltdown in Afghanistan," according to a government statement.</p>

	<p>Recently, the United Nations made a \$5 billion appeal for Afghanistan. The U.N. warns that 1 million children are in danger of starving and 90% of Afghans live below the poverty level of just \$1.90 a day.</p> <p>Pakistan in recent months has also sent food and medicine to Afghanistan.</p> <p>Like the rest of the world, Pakistan and India have so far not recognized the Taliban government.</p> <p>New Delhi has no diplomatic presence in Kabul after evacuating its staff ahead of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August. It did, however, meet with a Taliban representative in Qatar on Aug. 31.</p> <p>Before the Taliban took Kabul, India provided Afghan security forces with operational training and military equipment, even though it had no troops on the ground.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Under Taliban, Afghans safer but poorer
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/months-taliban-afghans-safer-poorer-hopeful-82895145
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan -- Afghanistan has undergone a dramatic transformation in half a year of Taliban rule.</p> <p>The country feels safer, less violent than it has in decades, but the once aid-fueled economy is barreling toward collapse. Tens of thousands of Afghans have fled or have been evacuated, including large numbers of the educated elites. They either fear for their economic future or lack of freedom under a group that ascribes to a strict interpretation of Islam and during its previous rule in the late 1990s barred girls from school and women from work.</p> <p>Tuesday marks six months since the Afghan capital of Kabul was ceded to the Taliban with the sudden and secret departure of the country's U.S.-backed president. The takeover of Kabul had been preceded by a months-long Taliban military campaign to take control of provincial areas, many of which fell with hardly a fight.</p> <p>Today, the sight of armed Taliban fighters roaming the street still jars and frightens residents. But women have returned to the streets, and many young men have put on Western clothes again after initially shedding them for the traditional shalwar kameez, the long shirt and baggy pants favored by the Taliban.</p> <p>Unlike in the 1990s, the Taliban are allowing some women to work. Women are back in their jobs in the health and education ministries, as well as at Kabul International airport, often next to men. But women are still waiting to return to work in other ministries. Thousands of jobs have been lost in the economic downward spiral, and women have been hit hardest.</p> <p>The Taliban have cracked down on women's protests and harassed journalists, including briefly detaining two foreign journalists working with the U.N. refugee agency last week.</p> <p>On Monday, the detention of some young men selling heart-shaped flowers in recognition of Valentine's Day was a stark reminder that the new all-male religion-driven administration has no tolerance for Western ideas of romance.</p> <p>Girls in grades 1-6 have been going to school, but those in the higher grades are still locked out in most parts of the country. The Taliban promised all girls will be in school after the Afghan new year at the end of March. Universities are gradually reopening and private universities and schools never closed.</p> <p>Poverty is deepening. Even those who have money have a hard time accessing it. At banks, lines are long as residents wait for hours, sometimes even days, to withdraw a limit of \$200 a week.</p> <p>More than \$9 billion in Afghanistan's foreign assets were frozen after the Taliban takeover. Last week, President Joe Biden signed an executive order that promised \$3.5 billion — out of \$7 billion of</p>

Afghanistan's assets frozen in the United States — would be given to families of America's 9/11 victims. The other \$3.5 billion would be freed for Afghan aid.

Afghans across the political spectrum have decried the order, accusing the U.S. of taking money that belongs to Afghans.

The Taliban have campaigned for international recognition of their all-male, all-Taliban government, but they are being pressed to create an inclusive administration and guarantee the rights of women and religious minorities.

Graeme Smith, a senior consultant for the International Crisis Group's Asia Program, warned against using sanctions, saying that would backfire.

"Keeping economic pressure on the Taliban will not get rid of their regime, but a collapsing economy could lead to more people fleeing the country, sparking another migration crisis" he said. He also noted that this round of Taliban rule "probably ranks as the most peaceful six-month period that Afghanistan has enjoyed in four decades."

The Taliban have re-opened the country's passport office, which is clogged with thousands of people a day. The Taliban have promised Afghans they can travel but only with proper documents. Those trying to leave seem largely driven by fear of a failing economy or the desire for greater freedom in a more liberal society.

Several officials linked to the former U.S.-backed government have returned. One of the returnees, former ambassador Omar Zakhilwal, said he encountered no rancor from the Taliban.

He said he hoped that the Taliban will "find the courage" to open their ranks, guarantee minorities a say in the government and go further to guarantee rights of all Afghans.

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	02/15 China-built rocket to crash into Moon
SOURCE	https://phys.org/news/2022-02-rocket-moon-built-china-spacex.html
GIST	<p>Astronomy experts say they originally misread the secrets of the night sky last month: it turns out that a rocket expected to crash into the Moon in early March was built by China, not SpaceX.</p> <p>A rocket will indeed strike the lunar surface on March 4, but contrary to what had been announced, it was built not by Elon Musk's company, but by Beijing, experts now say.</p> <p>The rocket is now said to be 2014-065B, the booster for the Chang'e 5-T1, launched in 2014 as part of the Chinese space agency's lunar exploration program.</p> <p>The surprise announcement was made by astronomer Bill Gray, who first identified the future impact, and admitted his mistake last weekend.</p> <p>"This (honest mistake) just emphasizes the problem with lack of proper tracking of these deep space objects," tweeted astronomer Jonathan McDowell, who advocates for greater regulation of space waste.</p> <p>"The object had about the brightness we would expect, and had showed up at the expected time and moving in a reasonable orbit," he wrote in post.</p> <p>But "in hindsight, I should have noticed some odd things" about its orbit, he added.</p>

	<p>NASA said in late January that it would attempt to observe the crater that will be formed by the explosion of this object, thanks to its probe that orbits around the Moon, the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO).</p> <p>The agency called the event an "exciting research opportunity."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Questions remain over Seattle missing texts
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3350413/forensic-report-timeline-mayor-durkan-missing-texts/
GIST	<p>A newly-released forensic report confirms that missing text messages from former Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan's phone were the result of a retention setting in her phone being reconfigured in early July of 2020.</p> <p>In August of 2020, Durkan's then-legal counsel, Michelle Chen, discovered that the mayor's text messages between August 2019 and June 2020 had not been retained. According to whistleblower complaints from Public Records Officers Stacy Irwin and Kim Ferreiro, Chen later directed them to "narrowly interpret 48 pending requests ... identified as requesting the Mayor's text messages," in an attempt to conceal the fact that the messages were missing.</p> <p>It was later discovered that text messages spanning the summer of 2020 from devices belonging to then-Seattle Police Chief Carmen Best, multiple members of SPD's command staff, and Fire Chief Harold Scoggins had also disappeared.</p> <p>That had a California-based cybersecurity company tasked by the Seattle City Attorney's Office with compiling a forensic report to determine how the texts from city leaders had gone missing. Released last Friday, the report found that sometime between July 4 and July 22, 2020, the retention setting on Durkan's phone was changed to automatically delete any text messages older than 30 days on a nightly rolling basis. The setting was then reconfigured to retain all messages indefinitely sometime between July 22 and July 26.</p> <p>For Chief Best, the report found that she had deleted text message conversations "periodically," consistent with an explanation she had delivered in a deposition.</p> <p>Missing messages from both Durkan and Best also coincided with ongoing social justice protests across the Seattle area, as well as the creation of the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest in late June, and its subsequent dismantling days before Durkan's retention settings were changed to automatically delete old messages.</p> <p>According to a statement from Durkan to the Seattle Times, her phone had "fallen into salt water" on July 4. She claims that when she was issued a new phone on July 9, the city's information technology department had configured the phone with the 30-day text message retention setting. That said, the forensic report indicated that the setting may have been reconfigured prior to her being issued the new phone, casting some doubt on her alleged timeline.</p> <p>There are also questions surrounding why the city's IT department would configure a new phone with settings that would compromise record-keeping.</p> <p>"When I worked for the City of Seattle I had two city issued iPhones during my tenure, and both were setup to retain messages forever," former Communications Director for Seattle's Office of Economic Development Joe Mirabella said on Twitter. "IT knew messages needed to be retained and everyone who works for the city is trained in records retention."</p> <p>That said, Durkan asserts that the report proves she was not the one responsible for deleting the missing messages, and that she had believed her phone was retaining her texts all along.</p>

“As I have said all along, I did not change the retention settings on my phone and intentionally delete any data,” she told the Times. “The forensic report confirms my actions did not delete messages from the phone.”

Meanwhile, there are multiple active lawsuits filed against the city involving the missing texts. That includes Irwin and Ferreiro — the two initial whistleblowers — [who are suing](#) over claims that they were retaliated against and eventually forced to quit their jobs as public records officers. [The Seattle Times is suing](#) over how its public disclosure requests for the messages were handled.

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[Public records expert: Missing texts from city leaders are ‘very suspicious’](#)

HEADLINE	02/14 Study: West megadrought driest in 1,200yrs
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/West-megadrought-hits-worst-case-scenario-driest-16917699.php
GIST	<p>The American West’s megadrought deepened so much last year that it is now the driest in at least 1,200 years and is a worst-case climate change scenario playing out live, a new study finds.</p> <p>A dramatic drying in 2021 — about as dry as 2002 and one of the driest years ever recorded for the region — pushed the 22-year drought past the previous record-holder for megadroughts in the late 1500s and shows no signs of easing in the near future, according to a study Monday in the journal Nature Climate Change.</p> <p>The study calculated that 42% of this megadrought can be attributed to human-caused climate change.</p> <p>“Climate change is changing the baseline conditions toward a drier, gradually drier state in the West and that means the worst-case scenario keeps getting worse,” said study lead author Park Williams, a climate hydrologist at UCLA. “This is right in line with what people were thinking of in the 1900s as a worst-case scenario. But today I think we need to be even preparing for conditions in the future that are far worse than this.”</p> <p>Williams studied soil moisture levels in the West — a box that includes California, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, most of Oregon and Idaho, much of New Mexico, western Colorado, northern Mexico, and the southwest corners of Montana and Texas — using modern measurements and tree rings for estimates that go back to the year 800. That’s about as far back as estimates can reliably go with tree rings.</p> <p>A few years ago, Williams studied the current drought and said it qualified as a lengthy and deep “megadrought” and that the only worse one was in the 1500s. He figured the current drought wouldn’t surpass that one because megadroughts tended to peter out after 20 years. And, he said, 2019 was a wet year so it looked like the western drought might be coming to an end.</p> <p>But the region dried up in late 2020 and 2021.</p> <p>All of California was considered in official drought from mid-May until the end of 2021, and at least three-quarters of the state was at the highest two drought levels from June through Christmas, according to the U.S. drought monitor.</p> <p>“For this drought to have just cranked up back to maximum drought intensity in late 2020 through 2021 is a quite emphatic statement by this 2000s drought saying that we’re nowhere close to the end,” Williams said. This drought is now 5% drier than the old record from the 1500s, he said.</p> <p>The drought monitor says 55% of the U.S. West is in drought with 13% experiencing the two highest drought levels.</p> <p>This megadrought really kicked off in 2002 — one of the driest years ever, based on humidity and tree rings, Williams said.</p>

“I was wondering if we’d ever see a year like 2002 again in my life and in fact, we saw it 20 years later, within the same drought,” Williams said. The drought levels in 2002 and 2021 were a statistical tie, though still behind 1580 for the worst single year.

Climate change from the burning of fossil fuels is bringing hotter temperatures and increasing evaporation in the air, scientists say.

Williams used 29 models to create a hypothetical world with no human-caused warming then compared it to what happened in real life — the scientifically accepted way to check if an extreme weather event is due to climate change. He found that 42% of the drought conditions are directly from human-caused warming. Without climate change, he said, the megadrought would have ended early on because 2005 and 2006 would have been wet enough to break it.

The study “is an important wake-up call,” said Jonathan Overpeck, dean of environment at the University of Michigan, who wasn’t part of the study. “Climate change is literally baking the water supply and forests of the Southwest, and it could get a whole lot worse if we don’t halt climate change soon.”

Williams said there is a direct link between drought and heat and the increased wildfires that have been devastating the West for years. Fires need dry fuel that drought and heat promote.

Eventually, this megadrought will end by sheer luck of a few good rainy years, Williams said. But then another one will start.

Daniel Swain, a UCLA climate scientist who wasn’t involved in the study, said climate change is likely to make megadrought “a permanent feature of the climate of the Colorado River watershed during the 21st century.”

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HEADLINE	02/14 Enumclaw: threats of violence close school
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article258389978.html
GIST	<p>Enumclaw School District canceled classes at Enumclaw High School on Monday and put two other schools on modified lockdown following threats of a shooting and bombing, police said.</p> <p>Police began receiving 911 calls at about 11:30 p.m. Sunday from people who reported seeing an Instagram post stating that the bombing and shooting would happen at the high school Monday, Enumclaw Police Department said in a Facebook post.</p> <p>Thunder Mountain and Enumclaw middle schools were put on a modified lockdown Monday morning after a similar threat was sent around 7:15 a.m., the school district said. Modified lockdown means no one can enter or exit the building.</p> <p>“Enumclaw Police Department is taking this extremely seriously and will work hard to identify the person(s) responsible,” the department wrote in a Facebook post.</p> <p>Other schools in the district are operating as scheduled. The school district said students who don’t feel comfortable attending class Monday can call to excuse the absence.</p> <p>Police said additional officers have been assigned to provide increased presence at all Enumclaw schools.</p> <p>The investigation into the origin of the threats is ongoing, and police said they are working to obtain information from social media contacts and partner police agencies.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 DNA elephant tusks link criminal networks
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/scientists-found-expose-poaching-criminal-networks-dna-seized/story?id=82877771
GIST	<p>Researchers in Africa have discovered a way to weaken large criminal networks responsible for the poaching that threatens vulnerable species all over the continent.</p> <p>DNA from the tusks of 4,320 African savanna elephants has identified networks for trafficking ivory out of Africa, according to a study published in Nature Human Behavior Monday.</p> <p>The authors of the study, University of Washington biologist Samuel Wasser and Nairobi Homeland Security Investigations assistant attaché John Brown III, were able to use previous work that identified tusks from the same elephant -- as well as close relatives -- found in different seizures, therefore revealing links between those shipments and their movements across the country.</p> <p>The findings showed that the majority of the 49 large ivory seizures (totaling 122 tons) shipped out of Africa between 2002 and 2019 contained tusks from repeated poaching of the same elephant populations.</p> <p>"It was astounding, what we found," Wasser told reporters. "Literally, we had dozens of shipments that were simply connected by multiple familial matches."</p> <p>The data also showed how "big, transnational" criminal networks may be behind the majority of these crimes and the strategic movements of criminal networks between ports in Africa, Wasser said, describing previous efforts to identify these networks as playing "whack-a-mole."</p> <p>The source of the poaching over the study period was "constant," with many of the organized crime rings operating for decades, Wasser said.</p> <p>Nearly all of the shipments, smuggled in large volumes as marine cargo, came from two places: an area concentrated in East Africa and another concentrated in Central West Africa, Wasser said. The smuggling process was similar to those used by the mafia and drug cartel in South Africa, Brown told reporters.</p> <p>Ivory seizures — large shipments of tusks seized by authorities — provide information that can help law enforcement to understand the activities of traffickers. Previous work has identified tusks from the same elephant found in different seizures.</p> <p>The African forest elephant is listed as critically endangered and the African savanna elephant is listed as endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species. About 415,000 elephants of both species combined are left on the continent.</p> <p>Combating the illegal ivory trade by lowering the demand in ivory destination markets such as Europe and Asia has been instrumental in mitigating population declines, Dr. Kathleen Gobush, lead assessor of the African elephants and member of the IUCN SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, told ABC News last year.</p> <p>Understanding the connections between ivory seizures could strengthen prosecutions of suspected poachers, ensuring they are held responsible for their crimes and helping to further halt criminal networks.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/13 Mexico cartels cannibal 'terror schools'
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/these-cartel-terror-schools-in-mexico-give-cannibalism-exams-failure-is-not-an-option

A member of the [Jalisco New Generation Cartel](#)—his stomach straining against a black sleeveless vest—is crouching over the body of a mutilated foot soldier from a rival crime group. The fallen man’s hands are bound and his chest looks like it has been torn open.

Shocking cellphone footage—captured in broad daylight—shows the hitman tearing large bites from the dead man’s heart. The cameraman continues to film as the hitman mocks the fallen sicario by pretending to offer him a taste of his no-longer-beating heart. In the background of the twisted scene, another body is partly visible, as is the shadow of someone hacking away at it.

When the video first surfaced in Mexico’s troubled [Zacatecas state](#) last month, it quickly went viral. Dr. Robert J. Bunker, a security analyst who studies [Mexico’s cartels](#), told The Daily Beast that was exactly the point: It was a public display intended as a threat to the Sinaloa outfit. (The Daily Beast is not linking to the footage due to its graphic and disturbing content.)

“Given its warning to other Mayo Zambada gunmen, the video has clearly been produced for PSYOPS purposes by the CJNG unit involved in the incident who then uploaded it to social media,” Bunker said. Though cannibalism has been practiced by several organized crime groups in Mexico for a variety of reasons, including ritualistic rites, this particular incident “appears secular in orientation,” said Bunker, a research director at the consultancy firm C/O Futures LLC.

The sicario seen eating his enemy is a member of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), which is locked in a deadly battle with the Sinaloa Cartel—formerly run by Chapo Guzmán and now headed by Mayo Zambada—for regional dominance in Zacatecas. Other cartels like the [Knights Templar](#), the Zetas, and the Michoacán Family have all [practiced cannibalism](#)—sometimes to terrorize rivals, to [initiate recruits](#), or even as part of [death-cult like rituals](#) meant to [weed out spies](#).

Dutch anthropologist [Teun Voeten](#), who has also served as a war correspondent in Mexico, likens the growing trend to that of beheadings. Decapitations were unheard of in Mexico before 2006, according to Voeten. “After the first incidents, other crime groups started to commit beheadings as well and a vicious circle of imitation and escalation of extreme violence came into being,” Voeten told The Daily Beast. “Now there are dozens of beheadings a year in Mexico.”

He referred to the cycle of crime groups trying to outdo each other as “a sort of Olympics of cruelty and sadism” with cannibalism—which is considered one of the ultimate taboos in many cultures—being treated by the cartels as just another form of savage competition. “In the case of cannibalism occurring more frequently in Mexico, just like beheadings, it also has to do with imitation and escalating violence,” Teun said.

When it comes to escalation, the CJNG—which is led by Nemesio Oseguera-Cervantes, aka “[El Mencho](#)”—has taken the practice of feasting on human flesh to a whole new level. In fact, they’ve institutionalized it as part of the mandatory curriculum at their training camps, which are known colloquially in Mexico as “[Escuelas de Terror](#)” or “terror schools.”

The country’s fastest-growing cartel sets up these camps at secret locations, typically in rural regions, to train new initiates in the use of small arms and combat tactics. Recruits are typically forced to become man-eaters during the three to four months of boot camp, experts told The Daily Beast.

“I’ve been there and there was a lot of [cannibalism],” said a member of the CJNG who agreed to speak to The Daily Beast only under the condition of anonymity. “They recruit them and then they start working on them.” The cartel insider explained that one of the reasons there are so many individuals “who want to become sicarios” is because the CJNG lures them with offers of “big bills”—but the promised signing bonus “never arrives,” the source explained.

“First they teach them how to cut people. They start by learning how to sever the extremities,” he said. This is an important skill for a future sicario, as the cutting off of fingers and toes—without letting the

subject bleed out or lose consciousness—is the preferred torture tactic used to extract information from the cartel’s victims.

At the terror schools, recruits are also forced to devour the severed digits, the source said. If they pass that test, they move on to learning how to dismember entire bodies. Such expertise will prove vital later, when they are called upon to cut up corpses so as to make them easier to transport or disappear. And, as with the extremities, the cartel insider explained, the conscripts are later forced to feed on larger pieces of flesh, such as the vital organs.

“They are given a choice of one of those pieces to eat in front of the boss. You have to do it without reacting or vomiting or you are beaten,” said the source, who added that refusal is also not an option. “If you didn’t want to [eat human flesh] they wouldn’t let you leave, they had you there,” he said.

The DEA’s former chief of international operations, Mike Vigil, said that breaking terror school rules often had fatal consequences for the draftees. “The only way out of there is feet first,” Vigil told The Daily Beast. “If terror school recruits show fear or commit errors or infractions they instantly become the victims of the other trainees who dismember and decapitate them [and] their flesh is then eaten.”

There are other rules that must be followed as well, including strict limits on gossip or revealing the school’s whereabouts.

“One of the terror school recruits violated cartel rules by telling his girlfriend where he was at and jeopardizing all the other trainees,” Vigil recalled. “After she left, the boyfriend was bound and told he was going to be killed for violating the rules. An ice pick was driven several times through his cranium into his brain.” Vigil said that inductees were also at times forced to sleep next to cadavers at night in order to desensitize them, and that the one goal of this process is to convert graduates into “emotionless killing machines.”

Political scientist Javier Oliva Posada, of the National Autonomous University in Mexico City, said the brutal experiences endured in the CJNG training camps also have another psychological effect on the recruits—that of instilling a sense of allegiance toward the group and their fellow trainees.

“A kind of loyalty to the organization is established by such demonstrations of commitment and courage,” Posada told The Daily Beast. He likened CJNG’s “absolutely savage initiation rituals” to the customs practiced by another infamous crime group: MS-13. New members of that Central American gang must “murder and even behead a member of their own family” to show fealty. “[T]hese acts of cannibalism [have] to do with these formulas of procurement, linkage, secrecy and loyalty to the organization,” Posada said.

Those who survive the grueling weeks of camp life are feted at lavish graduation parties complete with narcotics and prostitutes, Vigil said. After that they are ready to become active sicarios and put their new-found skills to work. In many cases, the experiences they’ve been through as trainees have left such deep marks on their psyches that normal life is no longer possible, said security analyst Bunker.

“Once a group of new recruits have graduated from training—that is, they have hunted down, killed, skinned, cooked, and then eaten their assigned victim—they cannot go back into traditional Mexican society,” Bunker said. “They have forever been changed; their souls have in a sense been darkened in the process... Having survived this brutal ‘trial by fire,’ they will not hesitate to carry out future cartel orders no matter how barbaric those may be.”

In discussing the viral video from January, Bunker referred to it as an act of “battlefield cannibalism” similar to other incidents that have been filmed during the conflict in Syria. For an enraged combatant, the eating of the “heart, flesh, or other body part is the ultimate act of disrespect and revenge for fallen comrades. The incident is typically taped by a fellow fighter and posted to social media,” to be used as propaganda. “The fighter engaging in the heinous act then becomes a real badass among his peers,” Bunker added.

	<p>Anthropologist Voeten said that acts of cannibalism, drinking the blood of slain enemies, or desecrating their corpses is a historical commonplace worldwide and “a standard repertoire of human behavior in warfare” meant to add “extra humiliation” after the initial defeat in combat.</p> <p>Cannibalism sends a strong signal that says: “We are victorious and we can do what we want and act with impunity,” Voeten said. “It is a calculated strategy of intimidating enemies into submission.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Violence, property crime up in Seattle
SOURCE	https://www.kuow.org/stories/seattle-officials-announce-new-measures-to-tackle-violence-and-property-crimes
GIST	<p>Violent and property crime in Seattle rose in 2021, and local officials are trying to respond. Mayor Bruce Harrell said he’s directed police to focus on violence and disorder in "hotspots" like Little Saigon.</p> <p>City and county prosecutors say they’re working together to pursue cases of organized retail theft. And small businesses are asking the city for more grants to repair broken windows and damaged storefronts.</p> <p>Overall crime in Seattle increased 10% last year compared to 2020. Violent crime in particular rose by 20%, a 14-year high. Reports of homicides and rapes did go down last year, but robberies and aggravated assaults contributed to the overall increase.</p> <p>Property crime increased by 9%, driven by arsons and car thefts. The Seattle Police Department has a separate category for the theft of car parts, like catalytic converters stolen and sold for scrap metal. Theft of car parts jumped almost 80% between 2020 and 2021.</p> <p>Mayor Bruce Harrell held a press conference on Feb. 4 focused on public safety, alongside Police Chief Adrian Diaz. Harrell noted these latest statistics and promised to focus on hotspots and repeat offenders. He held up the Little Saigon neighborhood as a case in point. Business owners have announced plans to close and leave the area, saying it’s too unsafe for their employees and customers.</p> <p>"Working with the community, including the restaurant and shop owners of Little Saigon, our police officers in the first 21 days of January made 23 felony arrests, 14 misdemeanor arrests" and recovered stolen property, Harrell said.</p> <p>Ann Davison, the new Seattle City Attorney, announced a policy change last week to no longer add to the backlog of thousands of cases that built up during the pandemic (she said she'll announced plans to address that backlog in the coming weeks). Instead, Davison said her office is now making a filing decision within five days of new cases being referred by SPD. Davison said it’s important for victims and perpetrators to see that “the crime and the response to it is connected, and that’s the piece that’s been missing when you have that long time gap of one to two years.”</p> <p>The Seattle City Attorney’s Office and the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office also announced a partnership to bring forward cases involving organized retail theft. They held a meeting with affected businesses earlier this month.</p> <p>Leesa Manion is chief of staff for the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office. She said representatives from Home Depot told them that people can easily sell stolen goods online.</p> <p>"There’s a lot of demand online for tools, and they have suffered great losses from individuals who target their business knowing there’s an opportunity and a high resale demand," she said.</p> <p>Manion said one strategy prosecutors are looking at is aggregating multiple incidents of theft by the same person into a single felony charge.</p>

Harrell's administration must also confront sobering gun violence statistics, including an 80% increase in fatal and non-fatal shootings since 2019.

DeVitta Briscoe [is the mayor's liaison for gun violence prevention](#). She said Seattle and King County are ramping up the presence of community groups like Community Passageways to focus on locations and people affected by gun violence, to intervene with young people who are at risk, and de-escalate conflicts.

Meanwhile, representatives of neighborhood business districts [told the Seattle City Council Committee on Economic Development last week](#) they are seeking more unarmed foot patrols, SPD emphasis patrols, "community safety hubs" in neighborhood business districts, and grants to repair broken windows and damaged storefronts.

Susien Lee owns the Fuji Bakery in Seattle's Chinatown International District. She said her storefront windows have been broken at least four times — she's losing count.

"They will break it for no reason, they don't even have time to come in or take anything. They just do that, it makes employees feel extremely unsafe," Lee said. The city has already been matching dollars from community groups in Pioneer Square and the University District to fund window replacement grants.

The roundtable members also asked the city to study any disparities in insurance coverage. Erin Goodman heads the SODO Business Improvement Area. She said businesses in the University District have flagged this as a particular problem.

"Businesses have been told they don't qualify for insurance simply because they operate in the U District and it's not a safe area," Goodman said. "This is unacceptable. Access to insurance is a key part of running a business."

Pipo Bui, the co-founder of Coffee Works, told the council during public comment that her cafes have been broken into, looted and set on fire, and employees have been punched in the face. But she asked the city to be thoughtful in its approach to crime.

"You're already starting to diminish these kinds of behaviors with more social workers, mental health support, bike patrols on the street, and attention — thank you," Bui said. "I hope that you will continue to do so with humanity and compassion. We know these people — and most of them, including those living on the street — do not commit these bad behaviors."

Bui asked for more grants to help businesses rebuild when they've been damaged. She also urged people working from home to "turn off their computers" and come out and support neighborhoods and local businesses.

Business owners said having more activity on the streets will help deter crime.

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HEADLINE	02/15 US seeks arrest ex-Honduras president
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/world/americas/honduras-president-extradition.html
GIST	<p>TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — The U.S. government has requested the arrest and extradition of Juan Orlando Hernández, the former Honduran president who has been accused in federal court in New York of receiving money from drug cartels.</p> <p>The extradition request was sent to the Honduran Foreign Ministry on Monday, according to a ministry official. Hours later, police officers surrounded the house of Mr. Hernández, who left office in January after his political party was ousted in elections last year.</p> <p>But whether Mr. Hernandez will be sent to the United States remains to be seen. The Supreme Court, which the former president stacked with loyalists before he left office, must implement any extradition requests.</p>

In a [federal courtroom in New York last year](#), one witness said Mr. Hernández bragged that he was “going to stuff the drugs up the gringos’ noses, and they’re never even going to know it.”

The accusations against Mr. Hernández have been made in at least two drug-trafficking cases pursued by prosecutors in the Southern District of New York.

Mr. Hernández has disputed the allegations in the past.

“It must be made clear that this is an outrage,” said Mr. Hernández’s attorney, Hermes Ramírez, [according to local news media](#).

“They cannot arrest him,” he said, adding that the former president is Honduras’s representative to the Central American Parliament, a regional political body. “He enjoys immunity.”

By nightfall Monday, convoys of police pickup trucks could be seen speeding toward the former president’s home. A neighbor living about a block away from Mr. Hernández said that dozens of police officers had surrounded the residence.

As news of the extradition request spread through the capital, at least a hundred people rushed to a main boulevard to celebrate the possible arrest of Mr. Hernández, who is widely disliked, and suspected of corruption.

“Juanchi, you’re off to New York!” the protesters chanted, using a nickname for the president.

Earlier on Monday, the Foreign Ministry said on Twitter that the United States had asked for the arrest of a “Honduran politician” but did not specify who it was. CNN en Español confirmed the extradition request was for Mr. Hernández.

The State Department directed all questions about the extradition request to the Justice Department, which did not immediately respond to emailed questions.

With a crippled and corrupt justice system, many in the region say that prosecution in the United States is the only way that justice can be served.

Many of the drugs being trafficked through Latin America end up in the United States, which means that American officials can file charges in U.S. federal courts and pursue officials with extradition requests.

Such a swift extradition request — coming just weeks after Mr. Hernández stepped down — is unusual, and will most likely send a pointed message to other governments in the region to clean up or risk being pursued in United States courts.

Mr. Hernández’s party lost national elections last November, opening the former president up to prosecution in the United States. The countries have an extradition treaty.

Mr. Hernández left office in January and was succeeded by Xiomara Castro, the country’s first female president. Ms. Castro has promised to cooperate with the United States and fight corruption in the country.

Tackling the widespread graft that plagues much of Central America is a top priority for the Biden administration, which sees it as a main reason for the record number of migrants heading toward the United States’ southern border.

Vice President Kamala Harris attended Ms. Castro’s inauguration last month, and it was seen as a message to other Central American governments to get on board with the Biden administration’s plan for the region or risk a frayed relation with the United States.

	The U.S. Customs and Border Protection recorded more than 300,000 crossings by Hondurans in the last fiscal year, making the country the second-largest source of migrants after Mexico.
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HEADLINE	02/14 Tacoma shop burglary police response in 8hrs
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/tacoma-tire-shop-felt-helpless-says-police-took-more-than-8-hours-to-respond
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. - Dwayne Pollan is a sales associate at Tt&T Tire Point S and says he felt helpless when coming into work early Saturday morning.</p> <p>“We were ransacked. They went through every cabinet, every drawer, inside the show room here. They went out in the shop they of course stole vehicles,” Pollan said.</p> <p>The owners were able to track down the two stolen vehicles and get them back on the same day but what’s still missing, hundreds of dollars in cash, more than two dozen keys from customers and employees and a gun the business has for protection.</p> <p>“Now somebody is armed. Now somebody else could be in trouble. Now if this guy's got the gun and he’s in a situation, he could use it on somebody. That’s scary,” said Pollan.</p> <p>Along with fear, there’s also frustration.</p> <p>“It took eight and a half hours for the police to respond and show up,” said Pollan.</p> <p>We reached out to the Tacoma Police Department.</p> <p>In a statement to KOMO news about the response time, a spokesperson from the department said: <i>I know community members can be frustrated with response times. Officers are dispatched to calls according to what is happening, with crimes affecting life safety always being dispatched first, such as assaults, robberies, kidnappings, domestic violence in progress, injury vehicle collisions, welfare checks with imminent life safety issues etc. South Sound 911 call receivers and dispatchers do a hard, thankless job.</i></p> <p><i>We were at targeted staffing levels yesterday with 15 officers working day shift, 25 officers working swings and 22 officers working graveyard.</i></p> <p>Ed Tuck, who is the owner, says those hours hurt them financially.</p> <p>“The police said do not touch anything, don’t disturb anything and we’ll be down there to investigate, so literally my employees are being paid to stand around and not be productive and we’re turning customers away at the door,” said Tuck.</p> <p>He said he feels more needs to be done to not only keep his business but the community safe.</p> <p>“We all work hard for a living, and we expect to have some sense of security with our personal belongings and our businesses,” said Tuck.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 ‘About 100 keys’ stolen real estate office
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/about-100-keys-stolen-during-real-estate-office-burglary-seattle/GVHYKGPEPJHANCNO4TMSH3NGRI/
GIST	SEATTLE — A real estate company is warning many businesses to change their locks after keys were stolen out of a safe, according to the Seattle Police Department.

	<p>Sometime between 5 p.m. and 4 a.m. on Feb. 11, burglars broke into a major real estate company office in northwest Seattle.</p> <p>Police said the burglars cut power to the building to disable security cameras and broke into the storage room.</p> <p>The burglars ignored everything in the storage room except the safe, which they were able to open using unknown tools.</p> <p>Police said the burglars stole about 100 keys to other offices of the company as well as private businesses at properties the company manages.</p> <p>Some of the keys were also for some “other sensitive locations,” according to the police.</p> <p>The real estate company is already attempting to contact affected businesses to get locks changed.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Medication mix-up at corrections facility
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/medication-mix-up-corrections-facility/l7GRGYFZGRDC5A4NF7L3XPKEW4/
GIST	<p>CLALLAM BAY, Wash. — A medical mix-up at a Western Washington corrections center has nearly two dozen inmates under observation Monday night.</p> <p>According to the Department of Corrections, 23 inmates and 1 staff member at the Clallam Bay Corrections Center were given the drug REGEN-COV when they were supposed to get a COVID-19 vaccine.</p> <p>Dr. Rupali Jain is the clinical lead for the University of Washington’s COVID-19 therapeutics team.</p> <p>She says despite the error, there isn’t a major health risk over the mix-up.</p> <p>“The most concerning side effects that have occurred are really related to allergic reactions which usually happen right away,” says Jain. “So if the individuals have not experienced an adverse event at this point, they most likely won’t.”</p> <p>REGEN-COV is not fully approved by the FDA</p> <p>Because of that, Jain says there is a system in place to report errors like this.</p> <p>“Anytime there is a untoward side effect or maybe a mistake that occurs, we are encouraged as healthcare providers to put this information into the FDA database to let them know that this is occurring,” she said.</p> <p>The Department of Corrections wouldn’t comment Monday night but a statement released last week says in part, “All individuals who received the medication were notified and assessed by medical staff. No serious adverse reactions have been identified.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Mexico: conspiracy behind avocado ban
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/mexican-president-sees-conspiracy-behind-avocado-ban/
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico’s president said Monday the U.S. suspension on avocado imports and recent environmental complaints are part of a conspiracy against his country by political or economic interests.</p>

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador put forward the conspiracy theory after the U.S. suspended imports of Mexican avocados on the eve of the Super Bowl following a threat against a U.S. plant safety inspector in Mexico.

In fact, the U.S. measure was due to years of worries that drug cartel violence in the western Mexico state of Michoacan — where gangs extort money from avocado and lime growers by threatening to kidnap and kill them — has spilled over to threats against U.S. inspectors.

The out-of-control violence in Michoacan reached a new height Monday, when prosecutors said they were investigating what appears to be the first civilian death caused by land mines being planted by warring drug gangs.

The state prosecutor's office said the 79-year-old farmer was killed in the front-line township of Tepalcatepec when his pickup truck drove over an improvised explosive device over the weekend. His 45-year-old son was wounded.

The cartels fighting for control of Michoacan — the only state that exports avocados to the U.S. — have already used trenches, pillboxes, homemade armored cars, rocket-propelled grenades and drones modified to drop small bombs.

But last week an army vehicle was disabled by an IED planted on a road, and 10 soldiers were injured by the mine or other weapons. That was the first known successful use of IEDs against a military target in Mexico.

López Obrador has downplayed the violence, and he sought to do the same with the avocado ban, saying Monday that avocados for game day itself had already been shipped north and consumed. "The truth, the Mexican avocados have already been exported," he said at his daily news briefing. "They already enjoyed the avocados."

On the other hand, he said producers who wanted to compete with Mexican products, or political factors, played a role in the decision.

"In all of this there are also a lot of political interests and political interests, there is competition; they don't want Mexican avocados to get into the United States, right, because it would rule in the United States because of its quality," López Obrador said.

He did not explain what those interests were, but noted ominously, "There are other countries that are interested in selling avocados, as in the case of other farm products, so they lobby, they look for senators, professional public (relations) people and agencies, to put up obstacles."

In fact, the U.S. grows about half the avocados it consumes and to protect domestic orchards from pests, inspects imported avocados — nearly 90% of which came from Mexico in recent years.

It was only in 1997 that the U.S. lifted a ban on Mexican avocados that had been in place since 1914 to prevent a range of weevils, scabs and pests from entering U.S. orchards.

The inspectors work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services.

On Saturday, the U.S. government suspended all imports of Mexican avocados "until further notice" after one of those inspectors in Mexico received a threatening message.

Mexico's Agriculture Department said in a statement that "U.S. health authorities ... made the decision after one of their officials, who was carrying out inspections in Uruapan, Michoacan, received a threatening message on his official cellphone," the department wrote.

U.S. officials say the security-related suspension of inspections doesn't necessarily suspend all exports. Theoretically, Mexican avocados that were already inspected before Saturday could still be exported.

Avocado growers in Mexico have been the victims of drug cartel turf battles and extortion in the western state of Michoacan, the only state in Mexico fully authorized to export to the U.S. market. After a similar incident in 2019, the USDA warned Mexico it would suspend the program if the inspectors' safety wasn't guaranteed.

But the avocado ban was just the latest of several actual or potential sanctions last week on Mexican exports stemming from the Mexican government's inability to rein in illegal activities.

On Thursday, the U.S. Trade Representative's Office filed an environmental complaint against Mexico for failing to stop illegal fishing to protect the critically endangered vaquita marina, the world's smallest porpoise.

And on Monday, Mexican fishing boats in the Gulf of Mexico were "prohibited from entering U.S. ports, will be denied port access and services," the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said, in response to years of Mexican boats illegally poaching red snapper in U.S. waters in the Gulf.

López Obrador dismissed those moves as part of the same conspiracy.

"If it isn't this one thing (the threatened U.S. inspector), it's another thing, the vaquita marina, or the dolphins," López Obrador said. "But the truth is there is always something else behind it, an economic or commercial interest, or a political attitude."

López Obrador has been accused of a cavalier attitude toward environmental norms and has criticized foreign or nonprofit environmental or civic groups.

"We don't need foreigners telling us what to do or placing sanction on our country's fishermen," López Obrador said last year.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Workers: drugs on transit a daily hazard
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/drugs-on-buses-have-become-an-everyday-hazard-seattle-area-transit-workers-say/
GIST	<p>Bus and train operators say so many people are smoking drugs on Seattle-area transit that the fumes, and volatile behavior, create a hazardous work environment that discourages ridership.</p> <p>King County Metro Transit workers filed 44 security incident reports regarding drug use in 2019, then 73 in 2020 and an unprecedented 398 reports in 2021, by Metro's count. The database reflects both a real increase and more reporting, officials say.</p> <p>Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587, representing 4,305 active members, says stronger enforcement is needed, including more police and security guards, with greater authority to remove people. Besides toxic smoke, union officials said crews who maintain transit stops have been punched, spat upon and threatened. Many incidents don't show up in official reports, union leaders say.</p> <p>Narcotics smoking aboard transit took hold last summer, and now surpasses needles and marijuana in driver complaints. Since then, at least six operators asked to stop driving midshift, and 14 specifically mentioned feeling headaches, dizziness or irritated breathing.</p> <p>Typically, users will flick a lighter beneath a piece of aluminum foil, which heats the fentanyl, meth, heroin or mixture on top, where the smoke is sucked through a straw. Air circulation systems carry the haze forward, and some transit vehicles don't have windows that open.</p>

“It smells like burnt peanut butter, mixed with brake fluid,” said King County Metro Transit operator Erik Christensen, who reported six incidents since October and collects field dispatches from fellow drivers.

The union endorsed Bruce Harrell for mayor, who ran on a theme of law and order, and has asked state lawmakers for help.

“We’re after the criminal activity, the smoking drugs, the assaults, the deterioration of transit,” said Local 587 Vice President Cory Rigtrup. “The solution is to restore transit, make it welcoming, bring back passengers.”

The stakes for the region’s transportation system are greater here than other cities. [Seattle transit ridership rose about 50%](#) in the 2010s, by far the highest U.S. rate, to carry 750,000 daily passengers pre-pandemic, and [46% of central-city commuters](#). Residents pay the nation’s highest transit taxes, to agencies that spend [roughly \\$1,200 yearly per capita](#). Ridership and [fare income](#) dropped more than half in the pandemic.

Metro faces a chicken-and-egg situation, Rigtrup said, where a post-pandemic return of more commuters would help deter drug users.

Local 587 is expected to consolidate workers’ reports into a complaint with the state Department of Labor & Industries alleging workplace hazards, said L&I spokesperson Dina Lorraine.

Metro General Manager Terry White agrees smoking drugs on transit is a greater problem lately.

“Absolutely, we are a microcosm of what’s happening regionally and nationally,” White said.

Metro plans to release a new [Safety, Security and Fare Enforcement Initiative](#) this week, developed using surveys and comments from 8,000 people. White hopes to improve conduct on transit but also show compassion, especially to riders who lack shelter.

“We should not be coming down on a totally punitive side,” White said. “We should figure out how we serve community. Hopefully we’ll be putting some things in place, where you’ll see more police on a coach.” White also anticipates new outreach and alternatives for homeless passengers, something he considers a mostly different issue from the smoked-narcotics trend.

Drug use in Denver caused ATU Local 1001 there to declare Denver [Union Station](#) “a lawless hellhole” in December. A television newscast aired a [worker’s video](#) of defiant users. Police made arrests, and the transit agency closed restrooms after finding traces of fentanyl.

The loitering soon returned, said Local 1001 President Lance Longenbohn. Managers granted one train operator a medical leave this month, since drug smoke reaching her control cab triggered asthma, he said.

“People are smoking it on the buses and trains, in the station. We’re trying to bring back riders. People get on our vehicles and our stations and that’s what they see. It’s not a very attractive transit experience,” Longenbohn said.

De-escalation team proposed

On paper, merely eating a bag of potato chips violates [Metro rules of rider conduct](#). In reality, King County shied away from enforcement activity, to reduce COVID-19 contagion, and in response to the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd that sparked racial justice protests. In Seattle, late 2010s data showed [disproportionate punishment of Black passengers](#) for fare evasion, and zero public benefits from frequently ticketing [homeless riders](#). Politicians often want to avoid enforcement tactics that might provoke confrontations.

King County [suspended fare enforcement in 2020](#). Sound Transit light rail, also operated by Metro, converted from military-clad inspectors to educational “fare ambassadors” who contact only 2% of riders.

However, Metro is increasing its previous 30 security officers to a total of 70 by summer, training a few each week, said Neil Crosier, security superintendent. County Executive Dow Constantine will announce a new fare enforcement policy this month, an aide said.

The unarmed Securitas guards aren’t legally authorized to remove people for misconduct, except imminent safety risk to passengers or guards, Crosier said. They mainly help customers with directions, how to pay, and where to find free Metro-supplied masks, he said.

Fare inspectors are legally empowered to evict nonpayers, if county officials reinstitute fare enforcement. Fare enforcement personnel, both here and nationally, are considered by transit agencies to be a front line of surveillance to deter or report misconduct.

Seattle police officers don’t patrol county transit vehicles but will react to serious assaults. Drug use anywhere, including sidewalks and bus stops downtown, is a “lower priority than violent crime, and we spend a lot of our time right now responding to violent crime,” said Detective Patrick Michaud.

Christensen says, “We just want them off the bus. Just get them off the bus, so we can drive.”

Washington state Rep. Jamila Taylor, D-Federal Way, said she will request \$500,000 in state funds to employ outreach staff she calls “de-escalators,” on the A Line serving International Boulevard South. They would have expertise in addiction, mental health or housing, under contract with community organizations, modeled on the [CAHOOTS crisis intervention team](#) in Eugene, Oregon.

“If a person needs services, or needs to be removed from the bus, they can handle it, rather than the bus driver. The bus driver can focus on getting the riders safely to and from,” Taylor said. Police support would be needed, but not as the first option, she said.

Plumes on Aurora

During a routine Friday evening commute, a group piled into the back of a half-full E Line bus, leaving Third Avenue and Pike Street. Someone lit their foil just beyond Aurora Bridge. A fidgety man shuffled down the aisle screaming, “I just want to love and protect you! I don’t want them to hurt me!” and was let out near Green Lake.

Another metallic-tinged plume pushed forward, where a grumbling passenger opened the window. When the bus reached Shoreline, a third and thicker cloud billowed forth. Wisps swirled around a young man who paused from nonstop rapping. The operator stopped the bus, walked back, told him to turn off his audio player. He complied. “Have a good night!” the driver wished everybody stepping off, drugged or sober.

After the bus returned downtown, around 8:20 p.m., breezes of smoke from the sidewalks around busy Pine Street drifted north toward passengers waiting at the Third and Virginia transfer stop.

Incident reports tell more stories.

Aug. 19: “Continued drug use and filling the cabin with secondhand smoke causing myself to get a migraine and slight nausea. Pulled bus into the zone 152nd and Aurora. Opened all doors and informed the riders I am unable to continue on route due to illness.”

Nov. 7: “I noticed a burning peanut butter like smell. I suspected that somebody was smoking drugs (other than marijuana or tobacco) on the train. Upon arrival at University of Washington Station, I looked out of the door window in the cab to see a passenger in the seat behind my cab smoking pills off of aluminum foil.”

Nov. 25: A man is arrested after reportedly smoking drugs from a foil, then hitting another bus passenger on the head and back with a taped broom handle.

Nov. 27: A man threw rocks that shattered bus windows in Ballard, after an operator told him to leave for smoking drugs.

Bus routes can be alluring places to smoke, Christensen said. “It’s warm, it’s out of the environment, it’s easy. The wind doesn’t blow the flame out.”

Local 587 President Ken Price portrayed teleworking Metro executives and politicians as oblivious to front-line conditions.

“Like cyber bullies they sit behind their computers and discipline you for not de-escalating predators, drug addicted people or thugs. Things they would never accept in their own workspace,” he wrote in a monthly newsletter.

White replied that he understands union members’ frustration. The white-collar staff are following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance by teleworking, he said. [A lifelong Metro customer](#) and employee, White said he still rides buses and trains daily between South King County and Pioneer Square, where he’s noticed used foils and odors, but not witnessed drugs ignited.

County Councilmember Rod Dembowski, chair of the Transportation, Economy and Environment Committee, said he’s scheduled a Tuesday morning hearing on “COVID impacts.” Union representatives will speak.

Dembowski emphasized, “Management makes the operational decisions, and many of the policy calls as well.”

Sound Transit has strung yellow plastic chains to block the seats near control cabs of its light-rail trains, following incidents of operators being overcome by toxic smoke, said spokesperson John Gallagher. He said Suraj Shetty, the new operations director, took a night ride and found “pretty disgusting stuff that’s happening on the trains.”

Previously, CEO Peter Rogoff warned the transit board about biohazards and vandalism after ridership imploded in 2020. At the next transit board meeting Feb. 24, they’ll hear about the smoked drugs phenomenon, too.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Metallurgist jailed 2.5yrs; faking Navy tests
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/metallurgist-in-wa-gets-2-5-years-for-faking-tests-on-sub-parts/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE (AP) — A metallurgist in Washington state was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison and a \$50,000 fine Monday after she spent decades faking the results of strength tests on steel that was being used to make U.S. Navy submarines.</p> <p>Elaine Marie Thomas, 67, of Auburn, Washington, was the director of metallurgy at a foundry in Tacoma that supplied steel castings used by Navy contractors Electric Boat and Newport News Shipbuilding to make submarine hulls.</p> <p>From 1985 through 2017, Thomas falsified the results of strength and toughness tests for about half the steel the foundry produced for the Navy. The tests were intended to show that the steel would not fail in a collision or in certain “wartime scenarios,” the Justice Department said.</p> <p>Thomas pleaded guilty to fraud last November. U.S. District Judge Benjamin Settle sentenced her in Tacoma, calling her actions a “crime of pride and ego, that in some way she knew better than those who set the standards,” according to a news release from Seattle U.S. Attorney Nick Brown.</p>

The sentence was less than half the nearly six years sought by prosecutors.

“Our Sailors and Marines depend upon high quality products and services from our contractors to safely and effectively meet the worldwide mission of the Department of the Navy,” Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro said. “We will continue to insist that our contractors must meet these high standards.”

There was no allegation that any submarine hulls failed. But authorities said the Navy has spent nearly \$14 million, including 50,000 hours of engineering work, to assess the parts and risk to the 30 submarines affected. The Navy says it will incur further costs as it continues monitoring the subs.

Thomas’ conduct came to light in 2017, when a metallurgist being groomed to replace her noticed suspicious test results and alerted their company, Kansas City-based Bradken Inc., which acquired the foundry in 2008.

Bradken fired Thomas and initially disclosed its findings to the Navy, but the company then wrongfully suggested that the discrepancies were not the result of fraud. That hindered the Navy’s investigation into the scope of the problem as well as its efforts to remediate the risks to its sailors, prosecutors said.

In June 2020, the company agreed to pay \$10.9 million in a deferred-prosecution agreement.

When confronted with the doctored results, Thomas told investigators, “Yeah, that looks bad,” the Justice Department said. She suggested that in some cases she changed the tests to passing grades because she thought it was “stupid” that the Navy required the tests to be conducted at negative-100 degrees Fahrenheit (negative-73.3 degrees Celsius).

In a letter to the court, Thomas said she was mortified at what she had done. Her attorney, John Carpenter, noted in a sentencing memorandum that she did not gain financially by faking the test results. He asked for a sentence of probation.

“Ms. Thomas is good person who let a number of work pressures cause her to make bad decisions,” he wrote. “Ms. Thomas never intended to place any sailor at risk and is gratified that the Navy’s testing compels the conclusion that she has not.”

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HEADLINE	02/14 Tacoma encampment death ruled homicide
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article258388728.html
GIST	<p>The death of a woman whose body was found on Tacoma’s Eastside last year is now being investigated as a homicide.</p> <p>Syretta Brown, 35, was discovered Nov. 13 in a tent behind a Fire Department station near the intersection of East McKinley Avenue and East 38th Street. She had been dead “for an extended amount of time,” police said in a news release. Brown’s family said she suffered a broken jaw and stab wound to the face.</p> <p>The Pierce County Medical Examiner’s Office has not yet released a cause of death.</p> <p>Tacoma police on Monday said they changed the status of the investigation after medical examiners ruled the case a homicide Feb. 11.</p> <p>Brown’s death being deemed a homicide brings the city’s total last year to 32, which ties the amount from 2020. That’s the highest homicide count since 1994.</p> <p>Debora Underwood, Brown’s mother, said her daughter struggled with mental health issues and drug use. She hadn’t recently spoken with Brown before she was killed and said Brown had been staying at a boarding house before being kicked out and moving into the encampment.</p>

	<p>Brown is survived by her mother, a brother and two sons, ages 3 and 9. A GoFundMe has been set up to help the family.</p> <p>She served in the military, according to loved ones.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 School boards get death threats
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-education-threats/
GIST	<p>The letter came to the home of Brenda Sheridan, a Loudoun County, Virginia school board member, addressed to one of her adult children. It threatened to kill them both unless she left the board.</p> <p>“It is too bad that your mother is an ugly communist whore,” said the hand-scrawled note, which the family read just after Christmas. “If she doesn’t quit or resign before the end of the year, we will kill her, but first, we will kill you!”</p> <p>School board members across the United States have endured a rash of terroristic threats and hostile messages ignited by roiling controversies over policies on curtailing the coronavirus, bathroom access for transgender students and the teaching of America’s racial history.</p> <p>Reuters documented the intimidation through contacts and interviews with 33 board members across 15 states and a review of threatening and harassing messages obtained from the officials or through public records requests. The news organization found more than 220 such messages in this sampling of districts. School officials or parents in 15 different counties received or witnessed threats they considered serious enough to report to police.</p> <p>While school controversies are traditionally local, these threats often come from people out of state with no connection to the districts involved. They are part of a rising national wave of threats to public officials – including election officials and members of Congress – citing an array of grievances, often underpinned by apocalyptic conspiracy theories alleging “treason” or “tyranny.”</p> <p>About half the hostile messages documented by Reuters were sent to Sheridan, former chair of the Loudoun County, Virginia, school board, amid controversies over coronavirus protections, anti-racism efforts and bathroom policy. Twenty-two messages sent to Sheridan or the entire board included death threats or said members should be or would be killed.</p> <p>In June, she received a threat saying: “Brenda, I am going to gut you like the fat f---ing pig you are when I find you.”</p> <p>The message, like the letter to her home, also threatened her children. Reuters agreed not to publish any personal details about Sheridan’s family members, at her request, because of her continuing safety concerns.</p> <p>Board members in Pennsylvania’s Pennsbury school district received racist and anti-Semitic emails from around the country from people angry over the district’s diversity efforts. One said: “This why hitler threw you c--ts in a gas chamber.”</p> <p>In Dublin, Ohio, an anonymous letter sent to the board president vowed that officials would “pay dearly” for supporting education programs on race and mask mandates to stop the coronavirus. “You have become our enemies and you will be removed one way or the other,” it said.</p> <p>School officials reported the messages to law enforcement in those three cases, as in many others documented by Reuters. No one has been arrested for sending these threatening messages, though a few people have been arrested for unruly or threatening behavior at board meetings.</p> <p>Attorney General Merrick Garland vowed last year to devote federal resources to combating threats to school officials after the National School Boards Association in September sent the White House a request</p>

for federal enforcement to stop the “growing number of threats of violence and acts of intimidation occurring across the nation.” But the association’s plea for help only added to the controversy as Republican politicians argued the administration of President Joe Biden, a Democrat, sought to censor free speech and label dissenting parents as terrorists. Nineteen state school boards withdrew their membership or withheld dues from the national association in protest of its Sept. 29 letter.

The school boards association apologized to its state members for the letter on Oct. 22, saying there was “no justification” for some of its language, without specifying what it regretted. The organization did not respond to requests for comment.

The hostility faced by school officials mirrors the campaign of fear documented by Reuters against U.S. election workers in response to former President Donald Trump’s false claims of voting fraud. A federal election-threats task force was announced in June, after a Reuters investigation that month revealed the widespread threats. In January, the task force reported the arrests of two people who had threatened election officials.

Biden’s Justice Department has also convened a task force on threats to school officials. The department, however, declined to say who serves on it, whether the task force has met or whether it was investigating any threats. In a statement, the department said it had “taken action” to prevent violence and intimidation of “those who are threatened because of the jobs they hold,” including school board members, election workers and other public officials.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, in a statement, characterized Attorney General Garland’s commitment to protect school officials as simply highlighting the FBI’s “ongoing efforts” to address threats of violence “regardless of the motivation.” The agency emphasized it was not “investigating parents who speak out or policing speech at school board meetings.”

Nearly half of the 31 school boards contacted by Reuters said they had added extra security at meetings, limited public comment or held virtual meetings when in-person gatherings became too chaotic.

In Luray, Virginia, a woman furious about mask mandates was charged by local police with making a threat after she told school board members at a January meeting that she would “bring every single gun loaded and ready” to school. The woman, Amelia King, emailed an apology to board members before the meeting was over, saying she was speaking figuratively and “in no way” meant to imply she would bring firearms to a school.

King’s lawyer declined to comment on the pending charge.

Some board members have quit their posts or decided not to seek reelection. A board member in Gwinnett County, Georgia, said she bought a gun for self-defense after prolonged online harassment. The board chair in Union County, North Carolina, said she installed cameras outside her house at “every angle.” Sheridan – the Loudoun County board member – said she rarely goes out in public alone anymore.

Jean Marvin, the board chair in Rochester, Minnesota, said a barrage of threats there last year deeply unsettled her fellow board members and her own children: “They said, ‘Mom, they’re going to kill you. They know where you live.’”

Living in fear

The wave of mostly anonymous threats has emerged against a backdrop of public protests by a new constellation of local and national activist groups, such as Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education and Parents Defending Education. Parents started some groups. Others have ties to veterans of the conservative movement or Republican political operatives.

Many Republican elected officials have sought to harness the anger over education policy in advance of this November's midterm congressional elections, releasing strident statements or passing laws addressing the issues igniting the school protests.

Much of the anger focuses on critical race theory, a once-obscure academic school of thought frequently targeted by Trump. Rarely taught outside law schools, the theory holds that racial bias – intentional or not – is baked into many U.S. laws and institutions because of the nation's history of slavery and segregation. Many conservative parents and politicians now use the term as an epithet for a wide range of anti-racism efforts and teaching on race relations that they say attempts to indoctrinate students with an anti-white and anti-American worldview.

One group, Fight for Schools, is led by Ian Prior, a former deputy director of public affairs in Trump's Department of Justice. The group took in \$10,000 in donations in the past year from 1776 Action, a national group opposing critical race theory that is run by veteran Republican operatives. The organization also accepted \$5,000 from the Presidential Coalition, which is overseen by former Trump deputy campaign manager David Bossie.

Neither 1776 Action nor Bossie responded to requests for comment.

Fight for Schools has staged protests at board meetings since early 2021 over pandemic-related closures and teaching on race. The organization is also leading a recall campaign seeking to oust Sheridan from the Loudoun County board before the next school board elections.

Reuters found no evidence that any of the new advocacy groups are involved in threatening board members with violence. Fight for Schools, in a statement, condemned threats of physical harm, personal attacks and harassment.

The board in Loudoun County, a Washington suburb, first came under fire in 2020 over pandemic school closures. Anger built as the district implemented anti-racism efforts in August of that year, including teacher training.

By June 2021, many parents were also incensed by a proposed policy to allow transgender students to use bathrooms matching their preferred gender identity. The anger grew after the parents of a female student who was sexually assaulted in a school bathroom in May told reporters that her attacker was a "gender fluid" student. Authorities said the student was a male who wore a skirt the day of the attack. Loudoun County's juvenile court declined to comment or release records on the case, citing legal privacy protections for juvenile suspects.

Conservatives seized on the case as evidence of the danger of bathroom policies seeking to accommodate transgender students. But the district's policy did not take effect until August, well after the attack.

Sheridan, the board chair in 2021 and still a member, became a primary target for intimidation. She reported the June threat to "gut" her to authorities. But police investigators failed to identify a suspect, highlighting difficulties in investigating anonymous threats.

The Loudoun County Sheriff's Office submitted a search warrant to Google to collect information on the sender, who had used a Google email address, police reports show. But the warrant turned up multiple IP addresses, leaving investigators with "no viable investigative leads" to find the perpetrator, according to a police report.

"There's no way to know: Did that come from someone from another state, or is it my neighbor down the street who knows my routine?" Sheridan said.

Reports from the county sheriff's office, obtained through a public records request, show law enforcement was notified of more than 50 menacing messages directed toward the school board between April and

November. Investigators did not pursue about half the cases after determining the messages did not constitute a criminal threat.

Police did make inquiries in at least 26 cases, including one email saying: “You people need to be arrested, tried and then hung by the neck until you're dead.” But investigators either could not identify a suspect in those cases or determined they did not have enough evidence to seek prosecution, a police spokesperson said.

Reuters wrote to dozens of the email addresses used to send hostile or threatening messages to Sheridan and the Loudoun County school board. Six people responded. One self-described “patriot” spoke of rage over “leftist scum” and “Antifa.” Another said “LGBTQ is an abomination.” A third blasted the district’s anti-racism program, saying that telling children “that race will determine their outcomes in life is truly sick.”

One had written to Loudoun superintendent Scott Ziegler in June. “Your life is being laid bare on the open and dark web. I don’t condone what’s gonna be sent to those close to you or the danger they may be in,” the email said, “but you personally do deserve it.”

Contacted by Reuters, the person who sent the message, who did not give a name, said it was prompted by rage over the student sexual-assault incident. “I was warning him, not threatening him,” the sender said in an email. “I’m not looking to be labeled as anti trans. I’m just anti rape in schools.”

Ziegler declined to comment.

‘Treason’ and ‘tyranny’

The people who threaten school board members often cast coronavirus and race-education policies not merely as misguided or offensive, but as part of a larger conspiracy to commit “treason” or impose “tyranny.”

The message threatening to remove Dublin, Ohio, board members “one way or the other” came from a man who identified himself as “James Baker” of “Citizens to Remove CRT from America,” referring to critical race theory. Reuters was unable to confirm the identity of the sender.

“All Americans know the schools have become Indoctrination Centers for Marxism,” read the message, which was also sent to other districts. “WE ARE COMING AFTER ALL OF YOU STINKING TRAITORS OF AMERICA!”

Chris Valentine, the board president at the time, said the threat was the worst example of the hostile messages district officials have endured since the start of the pandemic. Valentine said he started worrying whenever he noticed an unfamiliar car parked outside his home.

“It’s easily been the most difficult year-and-a-half of my life,” Valentine said.

Dublin police reviewed the letter and “found no safety concerns or credible threats,” a police spokesperson said. Still, the department added officers to ensure security at the next school board meeting.

In Rochester, Minnesota, members faced months of threats and outbursts at meetings over mask mandates, critical race theory and other hot-button issues. Marvin, the board president, said her son grew so concerned that he insisted on driving her to board meetings and waiting in the parking lot to ensure her safety.

Northwest Allen County school board meetings in Indiana became so heated last fall that police officers assigned to the district refused to continue providing security unless the board took action to rein in its increasingly unruly meetings, according to an email sent by a school resource officer to the board president.

"I truly am concerned for the safety of everyone at those meetings as are the other officers who have worked them," Sergeant Kevin Neher wrote to the board president at the time, Kent Somers, on Sept. 17, in an email reviewed by Reuters.

In response, the board eliminated public comment for its next meeting. Several board members as well as the schools superintendent, Christopher Himsel, had to be escorted by half a dozen police officers to their cars, Himsel said in an interview.

Neither Neher nor Somers responded to requests for comment.

At least two parents from the district reported a local resident to the FBI, after the man posted menacing messages about school officials on Facebook, according to one of the parents. One threat to Somers warned that someone might "bag and tag your ass in a parking lot." The same man posted a message urging others to get "firearms, ammunition and extensive training" to fight the "tyranny before us," according to a police report documenting the messages. Another parent who helps oversee a Facebook group opposing the district's mask policies posted a video of himself firing a rifle to show he was not merely a "digital soldier," according to a screenshot of the message provided by a parent to Reuters.

A spokesperson for the Indianapolis FBI office declined to confirm or deny any investigations into these threats. Allen County police documented several of the messages but did not take any further action, according to a police report.

Calls for enforcement

Christine Toy-Dragoni, the then-board president in Pennsylvania's Pennsbury school district, requested FBI involvement after her board received a slew of hateful messages.

As Pennsbury's conflicts gained national attention, board members were deluged with racist, anti-Semitic and threatening messages, nearly two dozen of which Reuters viewed.

"You better grow eyes in the back of your head motherf---er," said a message to board members in July.

The board's Toy-Dragoni responded in October with a public statement calling on the FBI to act. "These threats of violence and sexual assault and these expressions of transphobic, anti-immigrant and anti-Jewish hatred are certainly not protected by the Constitution, and must be investigated by the FBI," she said.

The school district reported the threats to local police and the FBI. Falls Township Police Chief Nelson Whitney said in an interview that his detectives spent several months working with the FBI to investigate threatening emails and other communications received by Pennsbury board members. He said state and federal prosecutors ultimately decided that the messages, "although offensive, did not rise to the level where a charge would be filed."

Click to hear a voicemail threat left at a school in Pennsylvania's North Penn school district on Feb. 6. In the nearby North Penn district, a report that spread on conservative media about a classroom diversity exercise prompted one man to call an elementary school on Feb. 6 and leave a voicemail that threatened the teacher with sexual violence and death.

"Mass of people who know who you are," the man said. "They will fucking see your head swinging from a pole."

Jonathan Kassa, a North Penn board member, said the threat was reported to local police and the FBI. Kassa said the threat is one of many the district has received.

"This isn't some one-off, random event," Kassa said in an interview. "I certainly hope law enforcement and our legislators are paying much closer attention to what seems to be an increasingly serious threat."

	<p>Local police in Hatfield Township said they have opened an investigation. Spokespeople for the FBI declined to comment on whether the bureau was investigating the threats in the Pennsbury and North Penn districts.</p> <p>In Brevard County, Florida, school board member Jennifer Jenkins faced threats and intimidation after supporting a district mask mandate. Then someone filed a false claim against her with the Florida Department of Children and Families, alleging she abused her daughter. Police in Satellite Beach, Florida, determined the claim to be unfounded and tried, unsuccessfully, to determine the identity of the person who made the false report.</p> <p>Jenkins told Reuters she has installed security cameras at her home, where anti-mask demonstrators staged multiple protests. She still feels unsafe at times, worried that the threats will escalate to violence.</p> <p>“All it takes,” she said, “is one psychotic fringe loony toon.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Crime spike force schools reinstate police
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/defund-the-police-return-school-resource-officers
GIST	<p>As the defund the police movement spread across the country like wildfire in 2020, school resource officers budgets were slashed and many officers were removed from hallways. Nearly two years later, that’s beginning to change as crimes swell in public schools.</p> <p>"I think what you're seeing and the reaction from these school districts is exactly what we're seeing in almost every major city in this country: Everybody's having buyer's remorse for defunding the police," Fraternal Order of Police National Vice President Joe Gamaldi told Fox News Digital on Monday.</p> <p>"We had 16 American cities last year have their highest murder rates in recorded history, and now people are quickly backtracking and realizing that police officers provide safety in our communities," he added.</p> <p>In Montgomery County, Maryland, schools welcomed students back to campus this school year without officers patrolling the hallways for the first time since 2002. Instead, they had "community engagement officers" who patrol areas near the schools.</p> <p>In the first four months of class, a staggering 1,688 911 calls were made. All in all, there have been 102 sex assaults, 87 assaults, 82 school threats, 76 controlled substance incidents, 57 weapon-related incidents, 57 conflicts, 35 mental health incidents, 28 property crimes and four robberies between August and February in the schools, 7News reported.</p> <p>The crimes hit a fever pitch when a shooting rang out at Magruder High School in the county on Jan. 21, which intensified calls from the community to get police back on campus.</p> <p>Now, the district is working on a plan to increase police presence at schools, though not to previous SRO levels.</p> <p>It’s not a unique situation: Alexandria, Virginia, saw more of the same.</p> <p>The Virginia school district was rocked by a spate of violent fights at the schools at the start of this school year, which some blamed on the Alexandria City Council voting to do away with the officers in the spring of 2021.</p> <p>"Our students are sending us warning shots, literally warning shots," Peter Balas, Alexandria City High School principal said at an October meeting regarding bringing SROs back to campus. "Please reconsider this. My staff, my students. We’re not okay."</p>

The city council ultimately voted in October to temporarily reinstate SROs in schools through the end of this school year.

And in California, the Pomona Unified School Board voted to defund [its school police last year](#). But just four months later, [SROs were back on campus](#) after a shooting broke out near Pomona High School and left a 12-year-old injured.

To law enforcement officials who work as school resources officers, such as Vice President of the National Association of School Resource Officers Rudy Perez, the job is "really not about being a cop." It's instead "truly about being part of that ecosystem that you can address the safety issues, concerns that parents have, that teachers have."

"I can honestly tell you as a campus law enforcement officer, it was more 90% ... managing tension and figuring out problem-solving. Ten percent of it was really enforcement," Perez told Fox News Digital.

Activists, Democratic leaders and some students argued during the height of the defund movement that SROs should be removed from campus because Black and Latino students were being disproportionately arrested or disciplined, with many pointing to Floyd's death.

"With the uprisings and the recent events that happened over the past year, students just don't want to be greeted with police officers when they come back," Amir Whitaker, senior policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, [told the LA Times in July](#).

"Educators acknowledge that the fight to remove school police is part of the fight for racial justice," he added.

School resource officer programs first began in the United States in the 1950s and became commonplace after the [Columbine school shooting tragedy in 1999](#).

The president of the Fraternal Order of Police National, Patrick Yoes, told Fox News Digital that school resource officers primarily serve these jobs: providing safety and security within schools, "tearing down walls, building relationships with kids," and "law-related education."

Yoes said that having police officers within schools is "natural" and compared it to any large event or concert that requires police oversight to ensure safety.

"I worked 36 years in law enforcement and of that 36 years, I served as a resource officer at a high school in Louisiana. And I will tell you that bar none, it was the best job I've ever had because I went to work each day feeling like I was actually doing something and I could feel that I was having an impact," Yoes said.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Guilty plea: attempt to sell nuclear secrets
SOURCE	https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/14/maryland-man-pleads-guilty-nuclear-secrets-foreign-government-00008742
GIST	<p>A Maryland man charged with attempting to sell nuclear secrets to a foreign government pleaded guilty to espionage on Monday.</p> <p>Jonathan Toebbe, a nuclear engineer, pleaded not guilty in October and was detained pending trial. In Monday's binding plea deal, Toebbe will be sentenced to between about 12 and a half and 17 and a half years in prison, and is required to turn over and provide access to all electronic devices, accounts and any other files he might have. He also consented to assisting federal officials with locating all classified information he possesses, as well as the money the undercover FBI agent gave him while the government gathered evidence.</p>

“There’s a message here for anyone who would sell out America’s secrets,” Alan Kohler, assistant director of the FBI’s Counterintelligence Division, said [in a statement](#). “The FBI and its partners will use all our investigative techniques to bring you to justice.”

Toebbe and his wife, Diana, a teacher, of Annapolis, were arrested on Oct. 9 after undercover FBI agents exchanged \$100,000 in cryptocurrency for highly sensitive nuclear submarine secrets that were stored on memory cards hidden in gum wrappers, peanut butter sandwiches and Band-Aid wrappers, stashed at drop sites in West Virginia, Virginia and Pennsylvania. Though Diana Toebbe also faces charges, there were no updates on her next court appearance on Monday, and her husband’s deal does not resolve her case.

“From on or about April 1, 2020 through Oct. 9, 2021, in Jefferson County, W.Va., and elsewhere, I conspired with Diana Toebbe to transmit restricted data to a foreign nation in exchange for payment,” Jonathan Toebbe told Magistrate Judge Robert Trumble during a hearing on Monday afternoon in Martinsburg, W.Va.

Prosecutors laid out the facts supporting the guilty plea on Monday, starting with Jonathan Toebbe’s employment by the Department of the Navy. Toebbe, a Navy veteran who later became a civilian employee at the Washington Navy Yard, worked at Naval Reactors, which oversees the Navy’s nuclear propulsion program. Toebbe had an active special security clearance to the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy.

“Toebbe worked with and had access to information concerning naval nuclear propulsion including information related to military sensitive design elements, operating parameters and performance characteristics of the reactors for nuclear powered warships,” the Justice Department said in a [news release on Monday afternoon](#).

The government went on to break down Toebbe’s actions from April 2020 to October 2021, noting multiple times that there’s “a reflection of who was acting as a lookout for him” at multiple dead-drop locations.

The Toebbes have been kept in detention since the fall, as the Justice Department said they were flight risks. [From details unveiled during a hearing this October](#), it appeared the Toebbes were prepared to leave the country if their activities were discovered, armed with cash, rubber gloves, a cryptocurrency wallet and their childrens’ passports.

Jonathan Toebbe waived his right to challenge his detention in the fall, whereas lawyers for Diana Toebbe asked for her release, which prompted a three-hour-long court session. New details were then unveiled about law enforcement’s extensive work to track down the couple and the Toebbes’ efforts to keep their activities concealed.

The unidentified foreign country contacted the U.S. in early December 2020 to share the letter the nation’s officials had received that April from someone using a common cryptography pseudonym who offered to sell details about U.S. nuclear subs. The letter came packaged with authentic and classified documents.

“Please have your experts examine the documents,” the letter said, according to the FBI. “I think they would agree that your country’s attempt to develop a [redacted] would be greatly aided.”

In October, defense attorneys for Diana Toebbe argued there was no evidence to suggest she had access to the nuclear information her husband had, the cryptocurrency or his discussions with the FBI agent, who he apparently thought was a foreign government. But the FBI and prosecutors maintained there was enough evidence to suggest she was involved with his plan to sell the classified information for a total of \$5 million.

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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mexico-confirms-1st-apparent-victim-cartel-land-mines-82887311
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY -- A farmer with fields on a front line between warring drug cartels in Michoacan state was killed when his pickup truck drove over an improvised land mine, prosecutors said Monday, reporting what appears to be the first civilian death from such a weapon in western Mexico.</p> <p>The cartels already have used trenches, pillboxes, homemade armored cars and drones modified to drop small bombs in their fight for control of Michoacan. The violence was responsible in part for the U.S. government announcing on Super Bowl weekend that it is temporarily suspending imports of avocados from the area.</p> <p>The state prosecutor's office said the 79-year-old farmer was killed over the weekend in the township of Tepalcatepec and his 45-year-old was wounded. The victim had fields in the hamlet of El Aguaje, which has been the front line of fighting between the Jalisco cartel and the rival Viagras gang.</p> <p>"It was an explosion of homemade explosive device," the office said in a statement. "It is not known what type of device it was, but investigations are under way."</p> <p>Last week an army vehicle was disabled by an improvised explosive device, or IED, planted on a road, and 10 soldiers were injured by the mine or other weapons. That was the first known successful use of IEDs against a military target in Mexico.</p> <p>But the primitive, buried pipe-bomb style explosives can be indiscriminate weapons. While some reportedly are activated by cellphones, others may simply be triggered by pressure.</p> <p>There may have been earlier casualties from IEDs.</p> <p>An Associated Press photographer interviewed a women who claimed her brother was blown to bits in September when he stepped on a land mine in a dirt road in Tepalcatepec. The woman said so little was left of the device and his body that an investigation was apparently never carried out.</p> <p>In November, residents of the Jalisco-dominated village of Loma Blanca showed AP journalists a small crater, with a round metal plate, where they said a land mine had been set off.</p> <p>The Milenio news television channel has described the IEDs as PVC pipe bombs buried with a round metal base below and a conical metal cap to direct or concentrate the blast. That coincides with the PVC pipe bombs that villagers showed the AP photographer.</p> <p>Michoacan state is coveted by drug cartels for its seaport and smuggling routes as well as the opportunity to extort money from the state's growers of avocados and limes.</p> <p>Avocado growers are routinely threatened with death unless they pay extortion money to the gangs. A phone message threat received by a U.S. agricultural inspector was what motivated the U.S. import ban announced over the weekend.</p> <p>The cartels' bomb-carrying drones have actually caused more terror in Michoacan than the land mines. While initially crude and dangerous to load and operate — and still worryingly indiscriminate — drone warfare has improved, and it's not unusual to see metal barn or shed roofs opened like tin cans from the impact of drone explosions.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Japan renews hunt Red Army militants
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/japans-police-renew-hunt-militants-wanted-1970s-82875526

GIST	<p>TOKYO -- Tokyo police on Monday stepped up the hunt for members of the Japanese Red Army wanted for their alleged role in attacks in the 1970s and 1980s, releasing a video with images of the aging militants that warned the “case” was not over yet.</p> <p>The video follows on the 50th anniversary of the 1972 Asama Sanso hostage crisis at a mountain lodge in central Japan, where two police officers were killed in a shootout.</p> <p>“Japanese Red Army members are still on the run and they may live somewhere near you,” the video warns, adding the “case is not over yet.”</p> <p>The video, produced by the police's public security department, was released on social media and is playing on big-screen billboards in downtown Tokyo. Authorities have also put up posters in train stations and other public locations. In addition to the wanted photos depicting the militants when they were younger, police added mock-ups of how they likely appear aged in their 70s.</p> <p>The Japanese Red Army, a violent ultra-leftist group that had links with Palestinian militants, was formed in 1971 and took responsibility for several international attacks, including the takeover of the U.S. Consulate in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 1975. The group is also suspected in the 1972 machine-gun and grenade assault on the international airport outside Tel Aviv, Israel.</p> <p>The campaign to identify the militants comes just months ahead of the scheduled release in late May of the group's jailed leader, Fusako Shigenobu, 76, who was given a 20-year sentence for masterminding the 1974 seizure of the French Embassy in the Hague, the Netherlands. In 2000, she was arrested in Osaka where she had been in hiding.</p> <p>The following year, Shigenobu declared the dissolution of the Japanese Red Army, but security officials suspect she is still linked to outlawed foreign groups.</p> <p>Tokyo police say they are seeking tips from the public about the wanted partisans, who they say might have returned to Japan and be hiding in the country.</p> <p>Among the seven individuals is Kunio Bando, 75, who was arrested following the Asama Sanso siege. He was later released and fled to Algeria after the 1977 hijacking of a Japan Airlines flight that was taken hostage to win the release of fellow militants in Japanese jails.</p> <p>Kozo Okamoto, 74, is wanted for his alleged role in the 1972 attack at the airport in Israel that killed about 100 people.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Group: NYPD FRT focuses on non-whites
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/facial-recognition-technology-reported-white-areas-nyc-amnesty/story?id=82798528
GIST	<p>More CCTV cameras with face recognition capabilities were observed in New York City boroughs and neighborhoods with higher concentrations of non-white residents, according to new research by human rights group Amnesty International.</p> <p>"Our analysis shows that the NYPD's use of facial recognition technology helps to reinforce discriminatory policing against minority communities in New York City," Matt Mahmoudi, an artificial intelligence and human rights researcher at Amnesty International, said in a statement to ABC News.</p> <p>"The shocking reach of facial recognition technology in the city leaves entire neighborhoods exposed to mass surveillance," he added. "The NYPD must now disclose exactly how this invasive technology is used."</p>

In a conversation about face recognition technology, New York City Police Department Deputy Commissioner John Miller told ABC News that the victims of violent crime in the city are "overwhelmingly" people of color.

"They not only deserve but demand that police respond to reports of crime and apprehend those responsible," Miller said.

Amnesty International's findings are based on crowdsourced data obtained as part of the Decode Surveillance NYC project, which mapped more than 25,500 CCTV cameras across New York City. The data was gathered between April 14, 2021, and June 25, 2021.

The project's goal was to find surveillance cameras in New York City and reveal where people are most likely to be tracked by face recognition technology (FRT). Amnesty International then worked with data scientists to compare this data with statistics on stop, question and frisk policies and demographic data.

Stop-and-frisk policies allow officers to stop, question and pat down anyone believed to be suspicious.

The research found that the areas heavily populated with CCTV cameras proved to be at greater risk of stop-and-frisk practices by police. Some people have criticized this policing tactic as discriminatory. In 2019, 59% of those stopped by police as part of stop and frisk were Black and 29% were Latino, according to the New York ACLU, which cited NYPD data.

According to data gathered by the United States Census Bureau in July 2021, of those living in New York City, 24.3% were Black and 29.1% were Latino.

In a statement to ABC News, Miller said that stop and frisks "have been down over 90% for over eight years."

"Numerically, the much fewer stops that are still made are based on descriptions of people given by crime victims who are most often members of the community where the stop is made," he said.

Miller added that these kinds of stops contribute to the NYPD's current level of gun arrests -- "the highest levels in 25 years," he said -- which is critical because "homicides are up by half, and shootings have doubled."

However, activists worry that invasive surveillance and face recognition technology threaten individual privacy and disproportionately target and harm Black and brown communities. Mahmoudi called the prevalence of CCTV "a digital stop and frisk."

The NYPD used FRT in at least 22,000 cases between 2016 and 2019, Amnesty International said, according to data S.T.O.P, an anti-surveillance non-profit, was able to obtain from the NYPD through the city's Freedom of Information Law.

"I'm not surprised that the surveillance technology hits, again, the same communities that have already been the primary targets of police enforcement, or specifically NYPD enforcement," Daniel Schwarz, a privacy and technology strategist at the ACLU, told ABC News.

"It's a highly invasive harmful technology. It presents an unprecedented threat to everyone's privacy and civil liberties," Schwarz said. "We've been calling for a ban on this technology, because we can't see how it can be safely used, given its great impact on civil rights and civil liberties."

The criticism comes as New York City Mayor Eric Adams said he'd expand the NYPD's use of technology, including FRT.

"We will also move forward on using the latest in technology to identify problems, follow up on leads and collect evidence — from facial recognition technology to new tools that can spot those carrying weapons, we will use every available method to keep our people safe," Adams said at a press briefing in January.

Adams' office did not respond to ABC News' request for comment.

The NYPD has been using FRT since 2011 to identify suspects whose images "have been captured by cameras at robberies, burglaries, assaults, shootings, and other crimes," according to the NYPD's website. However, the department says that "a facial recognition match does not establish probable cause to arrest or obtain a search warrant, but serves as a lead for additional investigative steps."

Robert Boyce, retired chief of detectives at the NYPD, said the department has stringent guidelines for using face recognition technology. No one is allowed to use the technology without a case number and approval from a supervisor, he said.

"It's a high bar to be able to use it and that's the way it should be," Boyce, who retired in 2018, told ABC News. "We don't use it for anything other than a criminal investigation, and we wrote a very strict policy on this, because it was under scrutiny by a lot of people."

The quality of CCTV footage is often not good enough for police to use it for face recognition, Boyce said, based on his time with the department. More often, he said, police use social media accounts to find images of individuals they are looking into rather than conduct FRT searches.

Images from social media accounts are often of better quality and are therefore more useful in getting accurate results when using face recognition software, according to Boyce. Police use FRT as a pathway to help them find someone, but they still need a photo array or lineup to identify a subject for it to be admissible in court, he said.

"I can't tell you how important it is. Our closing rates have gone up significantly because we do this now," Boyce said of FRT. "I think it's a tremendous aid to us. But like anything else, it can be abused, and you have to stay on top of that."

"If I had to give it a number, I would say they went up something like 10%," Boyce said of the department's closing rates. Closing rates refer to the number of cases the department is able to solve.

Boyce argued that FRT should be adopted by more states and used more widely around the country with federal guidance on its usage.

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, 18 out of 24 federal agencies surveyed reported using an FRT system in the fiscal year 2020 for reasons including cyber security, domestic law enforcement and surveillance.

Along with the research, Amnesty International also created a new interactive website that details potential FRT exposure. Users can see how much of any walking route between two locations in New York City might involve face recognition surveillance.

Amnesty International claimed that there were higher levels of exposure to FRT during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.

"When we looked at routes that people would have walked to get to and from protests from nearby subway stations, we found nearly total surveillance coverage by publicly-owned CCTV cameras, mostly NYPD Argus cameras," Mahmoudi said.

"The use of mass surveillance technology at protest sites is being used to identify, track and harass people who are simply exercising their human rights," Mahmoudi said, calling it a "deliberate scare tactic."

He added, "Banning facial recognition for mass surveillance is a much-needed first step towards dismantling racist policing."

The NYPD responded, saying it had no control over where protestors walked.

"We did not choose the route that the demonstrators took. Nor could we control the route that the demonstrators took," Miller said in response to Amnesty International's claims.

"There was no scanning of demonstrations for facial recognition," Miller said.

"The facial recognition tools are not attached to those cameras," Miller said. "In the cases where facial recognition tools were used, it would be where there was an assault on a police officer or serious property damage, whether it was a viable image to run against mug shots."

The ACLU has also called for a ban on face recognition or biometric surveillance by the government toward the public, Schwarz said.

"Any surveillance technology can have a chilling effect on how people engage and how they make use of their free speech rights. It's extremely frightening thinking about how protests can be surveilled," Schwarz said. "I think there should be a clear guardrails on its use."

Miller, the NYPD deputy commissioner, said Amnesty International's research does not tell the full story of how FRT is used.

"Amnesty International has carefully cherry-picked selected data points and made claims that are at best out of context and at worst deliberately misleading. In the characterization of how the NYPD uses 'artificial intelligence,' the report has supplied only artificial information," Miller said to ABC News.

Last year, Amnesty International sued the NYPD after it refused to disclose public records regarding its acquisition of face recognition technology and other surveillance tools. The case is ongoing.

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HEADLINE	02/14 Mayoral candidate targeted in shooting
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/louisville-mayoral-candidate-targeted-shooting-officials-say-rcna16169
GIST	<p>A mayoral candidate in Louisville, Kentucky, said he was "blessed" to have survived a shooting at his campaign office Monday after a gunman fired "directly" at him.</p> <p>Craig Greenberg, a Democratic candidate, was targeted shortly after 10 a.m. at Butchertown Market, where he keeps an office above the shops, Louisville police said at a news conference.</p> <p>Speaking to reporters, Greenberg said he had been holding a brief meeting with four members of his team when the suspect, who has not been identified, walked into their office.</p> <p>"When we greeted him, he pulled out a gun, aimed it directly at me and began shooting," he said.</p> <p>A bullet grazed his sweater but neither he nor campaign workers were injured, he said.</p> <p>A campaign worker shut the door and the suspect fled, Greenberg said. The group then barricaded the room with tables and desks.</p> <p>"We are shaken but safe," he said, adding that experience illustrated that "much more needs to be done to end this senseless gun violence."</p> <p>Citing an ongoing police investigation, Greenberg declined to discuss the suspect or a possible motive.</p>

	<p>Investigators do not know whether the incident was politically motivated and are considering all possible motives. Police said they are monitoring other mayoral candidates and community leaders.</p> <p>The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the FBI are assisting in the investigation.</p> <p>Greenberg announced his mayoral run in April.</p>
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